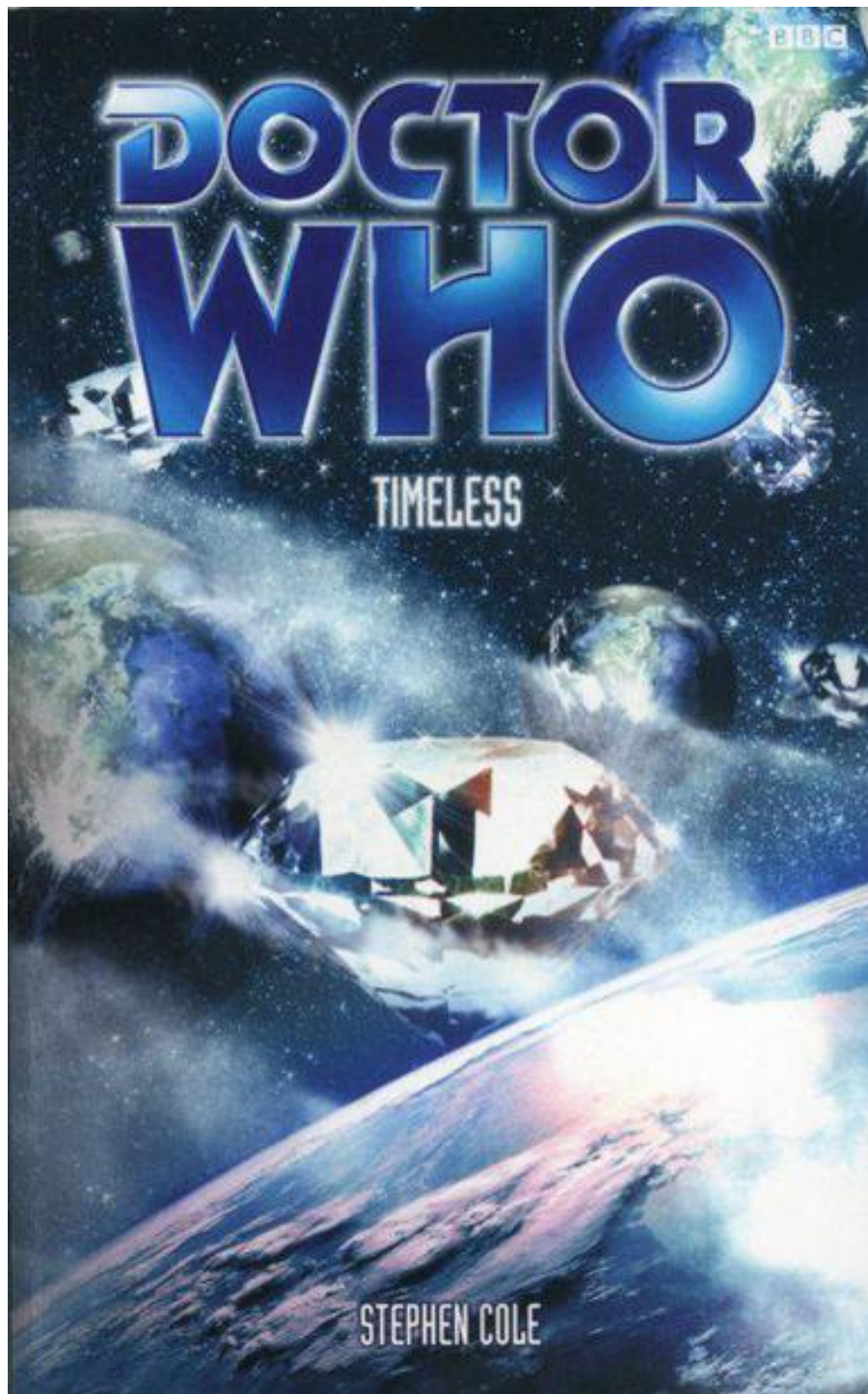


BBC

DOCTOR WHO

TIMELESS

STEPHEN COLE



The fuse has been lit. Reality has been blown apart, and the barriers that shield our universe from the endless others running parallel have shattered

with it. The only chance the Doctor has of saving the multiverse from total collapse is if he can get back to Earth where the damage was first done – and put things right.

With time running out, the Doctor finally understands why ‘our’ universe is unique. In proving it, he nearly destroys the TARDIS and all aboard – and becomes involved with the machinations of the mysterious Timeless organisation. They can fix your wildest dreams, get away with murder and bring a whole new meaning to the idea of victimless crime.

Soon, Fitz and Trix are married, Anji’s become a mum, and an innocent man is marked for the most important death in the universe’s long history. The reasons why force the Doctor into a deadly showdown in a killing ground spawned before time and space began.

This is another in the series of original adventures for the Eighth Doctor.

DOCTOR WHO

B B C

TIMELESS

STEPHEN COLE

DOCTOR WHO: TIMELESS

Commissioning Editor: Ben Dunn

Creative Consultant & Editor:

Justin Richards

Project Editor: Jacqueline Rayner

Published by BBC Worldwide Ltd

Woodlands, 80 Wood Lane

London W12 0TT

First published 2003

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The moral right of the author has been asserted Original series
broadcast on the BBC

Format © BBC 1963

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ISBN 0 563 48605 8

Cover imaging by Black Sheep, copyright © BBC 2003

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Mackays of Chatham

Cover printed by Belmont Press Ltd, Northampton *This book is for Dave
Owen*

provider of last-minute inspiration.

Thanks are due to Justin Richards for good, clean plotting and
conspiring.

And beer.

To David Bishop, Paul Leonard and particularly Simon Forward for
being so accomodating.

To Jason Loborik, Mike Tucker, Paul Magrs and Tolstoy, the Long-Eared Bat for lightening the load.

And to Jill, my wife, for loving patience.

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Pre-credits sequence

The story so far

It was a ruined world, you could see that from space. A great, flattened sphere, its bright continents gone bad and brown, drowned in the grey sea.

Just one of the many Earths that Fitz had videoed for posterity.

Anji clicked the stop button, ran the tape back a few frames and made the edit. The computer's hard drive whirred and whistled, the familiar multi-coloured floret whizzed round, and it was done. Then she scooted through the recording till she reached the next Earth they'd come to, wobbling about in Fitz's framing of the TARDIS scanner. Anji remembered this one. It was an Earth where chocolate had never been discovered. They hadn't stayed long.

Anji wasn't sure which of these myriad Earths she hated more; the

ones which were just dead rocks hanging in the blackness, or the ones which looked so teasingly normal.

You can't go home again, wasn't that the old adage? Anji shivered.

A minute for each, Fitz had suggested. He'd wanted all these alternative worlds immortalised, wanted everyone to remember them. By the fifteenth, Anji had taken an executive decision – ten seconds. It was all she could stand to view without wanting to slump in a heap, and if Fitz didn't like it he could find someone else to edit his stupid video. She'd tell him the computer couldn't handle that much footage. He was from the sixties, what would he know about it?

Frustrated and bored as the TARDIS doggedly tried time after time to reach the *real* Earth, Fitz had decided to make a documentary. The way he saw things, if the Doctor ever succeeded in getting reality back on track, then no one would ever know what the plucky crew of the Doctor's time ship had been through. And if things *never* got put right.

. .

She leaned back in the foldaway canvas chair Fitz had found for her. He'd written EDITOR – ANJI KAPOOR A.C.E. on the back of it, for what he'd termed that authentic Hollywood touch. *Bolly* wood, she'd corrected him. Fair enough, she'd spent much of her life distancing herself from her Indian background. But up here, floating around in space that was shuffling faster and faster through a whole pack of realities, the little background, cultural things that had helped to define you through the years seemed suddenly way more 1

important.

She felt horribly homesick.

The lights in her room on board the TARDIS dimmed a little, as if in keeping with Anji's mood. Night-time. The Doctor was trying to naturalise them to the TARDIS environment. He'd set the lighting to approximate Earth time-cycles, helpfully prodding them as to when to go to sleep, when to rise again. Anji was tired but knew she wouldn't sleep. So she hit play and ran her rough-cut through from the beginning. The first strains of 'Mars, Bringer of War'

from Holst's *The Planets* suite sounded from the circular speakers. The screen darkened as the credits rolled over black.

Un film de Fitz Kreiner

Anji smiled to recall Fitz's excitement when he'd seen what the Mac's caption generator could do. The cardboard placards he'd specially prepared still lay gleefully discarded in a heap at her feet, together with the coffee-stained Styrofoam cups and empty bottles of Snapple.

These Islands Earth

Cheesy title. Whatever.

Or, How the Universe Was Won (We Hope)

Starring Fitz Kreiner

And introducing Beatrice 'Trix' MacMillan

Anji mimed sticking her fingers down her throat. The cuckoo in the nest.

The cheek of the woman was unbelievable. She'd stowed away in the TARDIS

without any of them knowing. Secretly she'd been using it as a base for what she termed her 'business ventures' – in Anji's book a euphemism for getting as much as possible for herself at the expense of anyone she chose to target.

Unfortunately for her, the Doctor had given up landing the TARDIS for the time being while he sought a way out of the mess they were all in, leaving Trix unexpectedly high and dry. Unlucky, thought Anji with a satisfied smile.

Trix loved performing in all its guises, whether conning a sucker or, they'd discovered, indulging in amateur dramatics. Making the best of things and extending an olive branch, Fitz had innocently asked her if she'd like to take part in his movie. Anji had expected her to laugh in his face and that would be that – but no, she'd accepted enthusiastically, grateful for something to do.

And then, of course, she'd promptly tried to take over. Fitz had often come moaning to Anji about the creative tension – and equally creative use of foul language – between the two of them, urging her to be his screen siren instead.

Uh-uh. Camcorders made Anji self-conscious. She'd seen herself on too many home movies and cringed at the naff little waves and forced smiles she'd felt obliged to give every time the camera fell on her.

Much better to stay behind it. So by default she'd become the editor, cutting and splicing, 2

making sense of scenes in a way you never could in life. Especially not life as it was now.

They were all taking Fitz's silly little idea dead seriously. It gave them something to focus on, something to keep them occupied while the Doctor. . .

Yes, well.

(Fade up from black. Close up on FITZ)

His long face was serious and stern, holding a hairbrush like it was a microphone. He could be *such* a big kid, even now the first wisps of grey were showing in his straggly brown hair. He'd commuted his North London accent into the neutral tones of a news anchorman:

FITZ: The story so far. . .

(Cut to alarm clock in front of scanner screen showing space) FITZ (V/O): Time and space have been fractured, fragmented – in fact, royally shafted – due to the demented actions of an eighteenth-century time-travelling ex-British Secret Service agent pain in the arse called Sabbath.

(Cut to TRIX as SABBATH, wearing long grey coat, naval commander's hat and a pillow stuffed under her jumper. In little letters top left we read: RECONSTRUCTION)

SABBATH: Ha! Ha! Ha! Working as I am for unspecified higher powers, the nature of my misguided plans remains frustratingly obscure, ha ha!

Anji had to hand it to Trix, though it pained her to do so: it was a decent caricature, right down to the rich, low voice.

(Cut to FITZ)

FITZ: What we do know is this: Sabbath has been trying to collapse the multiverse. For the uninitiated, I shall explain: there is not just one universe, but an infinity of them. Or there used to be, anyway. Now, thanks to Sabbath's meddling, they are all squashing together into one – leaving us with a sort of mashed potato universe. The nasty watery sort your gran used to make, with lumps in.

(Cut to a starry sky on the scanner, and SABBATH'S hand holding a

potato) SABBATH (V/O): The universe can take a few lumps! My masters want a single universe – none of this ‘a-new-universe-is-born-every-time-a-decision-is-made’ rubbish – and that’s what they’ll get, so there!

(Cut to FITZ)

FITZ: Compounding our problems is a journal written by, er, me.

(Cut to diary on a desk)

FITZ (V/O): A fascinating, well-written and much sought-after account of the ill-fated Hanson-Galloway excursion to Siberia of 1894, it’s unfortunately become a bit of a paradox.

(Cut to a rubber chicken lying beside an Easter Egg) FITZ (V/O): One of those chicken and egg things. To cut a long story short, this journal has to be returned to a bookshop on Earth in 1938. Otherwise it 3

can’t be sold to its extra-special customer and wind up where it needs to be in 2002. But the paradox is, it only wound up in 1938 in the first place because we took it there in the TARDIS once we’d picked it up from 2002. And the problem is, that while we keep on trying, we haven’t been able to find the right Earth to take it back to – because they’ve all become jumbled up as the different universes struggle for supremacy and. . .

(Cut to glass of water and two tablets)

FITZ (V/O): My brain hurts. Being a mere mortal I shall defer all explanations to the fella whose cranium is bigger on the inside than the outside. . . the fella who needs to get the book back so he can buy it in the first place and ultimately save the day. . .

(Cut to TRIX in brown curly wig and the Doctor’s dark blue velvet coat) TRIX (bouncing up and down on the spot and adopting earnest public schoolboy voice): Hello! I’m the Doctor, a man of mercurial moods and wanderer in the fourth dimension of space and time.

Silly cow, thought Anji. Fourth and fifth dimensions of space and time, thank you very much.

Trix hadn’t been Fitz’s first casting choice for the part of the Doctor, of course; not when the Doctor himself was about. But he’d taken to hiding out in his laboratory, fiddling around with aimless experiments while the TARDIS

auto-systems kept trying to bring them home.

With the same guilt that got you when you found yourself staring at a traffic accident, Anji clicked the mouse on the trash and dragged out an outtake file.

She'd named it, 'OOPS.mpg'. She'd promised Fitz she'd wiped it.

As quick as it took her to double click, Fitz appeared in a little window on the monitor. He'd set up the camera on a tripod, recording on automatic.

'Tonight,' Fitz was saying, 'I'm standing outside the laboratory of that mysterious traveller in time and space known only as. . . the Doctor!' He mugged a spooky expression to his make-believe audience and walked casually towards the lab door further down the corridor. 'I've been promised an inter-view tonight in relation to the current crisis in the vortex and I. . . ' He cupped a hand to his ear, like a political reporter outside Downing Street. 'Yes – wait

– I think I can hear movement inside.'

The door flew open, nearly flattening Fitz, and out stormed a blur of dark velvet and bobbing brown curls. The Doctor froze as he almost smacked into the camera. His pale blue eyes blinked in surprise.

'Doctor!' moaned Fitz. 'Jesus, I think you broke my nose. . . '

The Doctor ignored him, peering into the camera as if searching for someone inside. 'What are you doing, Fitz?' Usually so proper and softly spoken, there was a hard edge to his voice now.

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'I'm making a film,' Fitz explained, 'a kind of documentary about. . . well, all this. You know, our predicament.'

'A bit of light-hearted fun, eh?' asked the Doctor. Anji felt her insides stir, same as every other time she'd played back the clip now she knew what was coming. Over the Doctor's shoulder, Fitz was shrugging.

'More of a distraction, I suppose. And because when we sort everything out, I don't want to forget what we've been through to do it.'

'Who were you thinking of showing it to?' wondered the Doctor softly, his long face still turned to the camera. 'When it's finished.'

‘Well, I don’t know. No one, I suppose –’

‘Well, I *suppose* you’re right,’ snapped the Doctor. He spun round to advance on Fitz. ‘After all, no one will be left anywhere in the cosmos if we can’t put things right.’

‘I know!’ Fitz protested.

The Doctor’s voice was rising. ‘It’s the end of everything. Fitz! Everything!’

‘I know, I know!’ His nose was bleeding and he had to keep wiping at it.

‘But I’m not helping by waiting about doing nothing here, am I? While you hop aimlessly from one universe to another, hoping you’ll get lucky –’

‘*Me*, aimless?’ bellowed the Doctor. ‘You’re making a movie about the end of *all* the universes to *amuse* yourself, for a distraction! Can you comprehend even remotely. . . ’ He seemed to tire of talking, strode off again towards the camera. Again he stopped, as if confused to find it still blocking his way.

But his eyes, once bright, were hooded and furtive now. He pushed past the camera and out of sight.

Anji dosed the clip down. She’d seen that last, tired look the Doctor gave the camera a lot, lately. Every time she caught sight of her dark eyes reflected out of the monitor. Lonely for her own place and time.

She’d not seen the Doctor for three days straight. And even then he’d just stomped past her with his hands in his pockets, not saying a word.

Someone thumped at Anji’s door. She swore, jumped off her seat, and swiftly switched off the monitor, just as the door pushed open.

‘Fitz, hi!’ she said with one of those forced smiles and naff waves, though his camcorder was nowhere to be seen. ‘How are you doing?’

‘Fine,’ he replied, without much conviction. He was wearing his ‘director’s beret’ – a threadbare black thing clinging to his head at a rakish angle.

‘Been doing more filming?’

He shook his head. ‘Caught another Earth on the scanner a while back.

Dead one again.'

'I hate the dead ones.' Anji sighed. 'If you make me edit it into the montage I'll have to reduce the time on screen of the others, you know that, right?'

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Fitz yawned, stretched and rubbed his hands over his unshaven cheeks.

'The shoot's finished for now, anyway.' He tossed a tiny tape on to Anji's desk.

'Me and Trix just re-enacted the climax of our last thrilling adventure.'

'Who played the Doctor?'

'Me, this time,' said Fitz firmly. 'She was everyone else.'

'Except me, right?'

Fitz looked sheepish. 'Well, *I* couldn't play you, could I?'

Before Anji could reply, the Doctor appeared suddenly in the doorway. He smiled at her vaguely and peered round, preoccupied, as if he'd lost something. Then his eyes lit up.

'Fitz! There you are.' He clapped Fitz heartily on the shoulder and produced a dark-stained handkerchief from his pocket. 'Here. For your bruised nose.'

'Huh?' Fitz stared at the grubby rag in horror. 'What's that?'

'Oh, only blood.' He sniffed it. 'Sabbath's I think.'

'I'll pass, thanks. In any case. . . ' Fitz stared in bemusement back and forth between hanky and Doctor. 'You clonked my conk four *days* ago!'

'Has it been four days? Really? I'm afraid I was a little preoccupied at the time of our last encounter.' The Doctor cast a look at the dead monitor, then a pointed one at Anji. 'I really don't remember much about it.'

Anji felt herself blush.

Fitz looked at the Doctor uncertainly. Anji knew he hated the two of them not being friends. But his bruised nose was still pushed out of joint.

The Doctor looked awkward, fiddled with a button on his coat ‘Fitz, I’ve been thinking. . . ’

He didn’t look up. ‘For four days, all by yourself?’

‘I *would* like to be in your film.’

Anji raised her eyebrows.

‘See. . . I’d rather be playing a part, than just looking on at the sidelines.’

The Doctor eyed Fitz hopefully. ‘That is, if you’ve any parts still going?’

Fitz pouted like a sulky kid. ‘Sorry. I’ve finished it now.’

‘Oh.’ The Doctor looked genuinely crestfallen. ‘Might there be a sequel?’

‘Depends, doesn’t it?’

‘Hey, Fitz,’ said Anji cajolingly. ‘Why not add a pre-credits sequence?’

‘Eh?’

She shrugged. ‘They’re all the rage on TV shows in my time, especially in America. Something a bit intriguing, a bit dramatic. You know, to entice the viewer into sitting down and watching the show.’

The Doctor nodded knowingly, like he was an authority on American television, and looked hopeful.

Fitz met his gaze and gave a small smile. ‘Why not?’

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The Doctor clapped his hands. ‘Wonderful! What do you say, Anji, something arresting and exciting?! And what did you say? What did you say?’ He pinched the bridge of his nose, willing himself to remember, and then clicked his fingers. ‘Dramatic!’

Cheesy as you like, the TARDIS chose that moment to rock as if hit by

an atom bomb.

Anji was hurled across the room with a shriek. The lights flickered off just as she slammed into the floor. She heard the low, mournful tolling of some almighty bell, ringing out from somewhere deep inside the TARDIS.

‘When will I learn to keep my mouth shut?’ Anji moaned.

‘What’s happening?’ yelled Fitz.

‘It’s time to fight,’ said the Doctor, with more determination than Anji had heard in him for weeks. ‘Time to find out how the story really ends.’ Then he gasped. A gasp Anji hadn’t heard for ages, the kind of gasp that said he’d thought of something big.

‘Or – how it all really *begins*! A pre-credits sequence! Anji, you might just be a genius!’

And sure-footed and fast as light in the darkness, he ran from the room.

7

One

Out of time

At the beginning of the universe there are three people watching, usually.

Chloe, her friend Jamais, and Chloe’s dolly.

Chloe sees the speck (it won’t be called a primeval atom for billions of years) hanging in the void. There’s no light, no space, no time passing; she knows she shouldn’t be able to see at all, really. But it’s there before her, sometimes the size of a pinhead, or a marble, sometimes so big she can barely catch its curvature.

Jamais shows it all to her as they hover like phantoms in this void of nothing. He can take people anywhere. He has his own time inside his black, furry belly, and he breathes it out so you can see.

They definitely, positively should not be here, Chloe knows that. They’re not supposed to travel by themselves. She squeezes her dolly more tightly.

But when Erasmus confronts them, asks where they've been, she can tell him the truth: Nowhere. Chloe doesn't like lying, but she likes to take Jamais for walks, and where else can they go to play away from everybody and get away from *everything*?

She strokes Jamais's seal-like head. It bobs around on the end of his long flagpole neck. 'How will we start the universe this time?' she asks him.

Jamais scampers about in the nothingness. He leaves no tracks. Then he bounds up to her and nuzzles her arm. Chloe instinctively raises her dolly out of his reach.

Jamais hates her dolly because she's the only other thing Chloe loves. Jamais doesn't like competing for her affections. He's bitten the doll before. She slapped his nose for it, and he howled and was sorry. But still from time to time Chloe catches the hungry look in his round, indigo eyes, and she doesn't want more teeth marks in her doll's shiny legs.

'What is it?' she asks him, pushing his sleek head away.

He noses under her arm and a piece of cold coloured plastic flops to the nothing at her feet. Chloe smiles and retrieves it.

Jamais's eyes are glittering, the light inside them making the void sparkle like frost. Chloe places her lips to a valve in the plastic and heaves out her biggest breath. The plastic stirs sluggishly, then lifts and grows.

9

Soon, it's the biggest, brightest beach ball ever!

Chloe giggles and throws the ball to Jamais. He catches it expertly on his nose, bounces it in the air, flaps about beneath it, faster and faster. Chloe and her dolly both laugh, both get more and more excited. They both know where Jamais's dancing will lead and they have to be ready.

Then at last, Jamais jumps extra high and bats the ball with his glossy black head, towards the blob. It sails through the air that Jamais exhales and taps against the ball of matter.

POP, goes the universe.

For a long, lingering trillion-trillion-trillionth of a second Chloe shrieks with laughter, as a pinprick of light appears. It grows and expands everywhere.

Its temperature is close to infinity but starting to fall. Now space has been created, time may flow freely. Now time exists, space can start to expand.

‘That was the best way of starting this little universe so far!’ she squeals as Jamais nuzzles around her knees, happy that she is pleased with him. ‘How will we start it next time?’

But the incandescence is hurting Chloe’s eyes and she knows that they can be seen now, should anyone be watching. It’s time to go. She feels the tug of time like the teeth of Jamais pulling at her pretty pink skirt. He’s bored now the fun is over, restless. He wants to go home.

She turns, and a glimpse of blue flashes into her eyes. Something sharp-edged and rectangular, waning in the workaday forces pulling and pushing the shape of this young universe.

‘Look, dolly,’ she whispers. ‘Look, it’s him. The man from the book. He’s found his way here at last in his funny box.’ She smiles. ‘I think it’s going to be pulled apart, don’t you?’

10

Two

Days when it doesn’t pay to get out of bed

It wasn’t so much the fact they’d been arguing again that bothered Guy, it was the fact she’d been naked at the time. Just lying there in the bath, slagging him off.

He remembered back a few months to the time when seeing Julie naked was something special, a gorgeous moment, the warm-up act to a night of no sleep and the following day spent propping open his eyelids at his desk.

Not that falling asleep at work was ever all that tough. He was on the fast track at the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs; supposedly speedy, anyway. A mere Administrative Officer today but through the wonders of accelerated promotion, a senior civil servant by the time he was thirty.

Whoopee! He could hardly wait.

They moved you around a lot at DEFRA when you were a Fast Streamer, a year there, a year here. The year here was in admin support for the Sea Fisheries Inspectorate. Working at Cod's right hand, his boss always said, and Guy always forced a chuckle on cue. Fast track. Play the game, get through it, get out and go and do something more exciting. *Anything*. Right now he was filing, fielding phone calls, compiling statistics –

'Guy, mate, make us a cup of tea will you?'

And making tea, of course.

'Sure, Mike,' said Guy. 'I was about to make one anyway.'

'Excellent, mate. Marvellous.' Mike cleared his throat. 'Don't spill any on your shirt. I won't have anyone wearing *Tea*-shirts in my department!' He cracked up, his wide mouth magically appearing through his bristling ginger beard. 'Bet you've missed having me around, haven't you?' He whipped out a finger and shot Guy with it. 'Nothing to laugh about, right?'

'Right!' Guy said gamely, catching the new temp's eye and flashing her an agonised look. No one to laugh *at*, anyway. Mike was the only person he knew who could possibly put up a sign saying YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE MAD TO

WORK HERE – BUT IT HELPS! without a sense of irony. And after a week's holiday visiting his sister in Brighton, Mike was clearly relishing the chance to

'entertain' a less candid audience, one that couldn't tell him to piss off without losing their jobs.

11

'I'd ask the new girl,' Mike went on, winking at Guy, 'but I'm not sexist.

Am I, Guy, darling?!' He hooted with laughter, dabbed at his shiny pink head with a spotted handkerchief. 'It's a man's life in DEFRA, eh? Nudge, nudge!

Working at Cod's right hand!'

Guy managed a weak titter. 'Earl Grey as usual, is it?'

'All hail the Earl,' said Mike, nodding. 'What about you, love?'

The temp shook her head. 'No, thanks.' She looked at Guy as he passed.

Checking him out? She was an Asian girl, pretty, hair in a bob as black as her cute little trouser suit. Guy held in his fledgling beer gut as he walked past, affected not to notice her deep brown eyes on him.

'Oh, just one thing, mate,' Mike called. He sounded suddenly serious, almost competent. 'While I was away, did you go through the things on my desk?'

Guy smiled, ready to enjoy a moment's glory. 'Sorted them, you mean. I went through your in-tray, dealt with some of the more pressing stuff. The sub-committee was asking –'

'Yes, well, a word of advice, mate.' Mike had transformed from office joker to ginger-bearded ogre in just a few seconds. 'When I say my desk is off limits, I mean it, OK? No toucho the desko, comprenez?'

Guy felt himself colour. 'Well, I thought you'd expect me to –'

'– to do as you're told, mate, that's what I expect. So if you could see to that, and stop acting like Mr Nosey, everything'll be cool, yeah?'

'Yeah, sure,' Guy agreed meekly. What was this about, showing off in front of the new girl? 'Sorry, Mike.'

'We'll talk about what you went through later.' He slumped back down in his creaking swivel chair. 'Oh, and don't forget to feed the Earl a sugarlump, will you?' He smiled. 'Keep him sweet, know what I mean?'

Guy nodded, slightly shell-shocked. So much for initiative being rewarded.

'You don't put your heart into anything, do you?' Julie had whined, washing her armpits in delicate, lavender-scented suds. 'Everything's just little gestures, little shows to make the people in your life think how great you are, to help you coast by on the bare minimum.'

He left for the tea bar. It was bad enough his girlfriend had seen through him, but his boss too? Mike had never bawled him out like

that before. OK, so he'd said all that crap about a man's desk being sacrosanct, but Guy had figured that was a test or something. Mike was the sort who went out for a birthday drink, begged, 'Whatever you do, don't sing Happy Birthday to me!'

and then sulked if you didn't. How was he to know. . . ?

Guy reined in his thoughts as he entered the tea bar. There, casting her piercing green eyes over the wholemeal also-rans left behind on the 'freshly-made' sandwich counter, was the tasty girl from Noise Pollution – Annie the 12

admin assistant. They'd met at a mutual friend's leaving party last year, exchanged half-a-dozen drunken words and a snog. Whenever things got bad with Julie, his imagination went into overdrive about what might've been with Annie, even though she'd only ever blushed and blanked him since.

But now, incredibly, she smiled as she turned and saw him. Her teeth were so white, offset by her suntan and freckles. 'Hey, Guy, there you are.'

'Er, yes,' he managed, caught off guard by her opening gambit. 'And there *you* are, about to stuff your pretty cheeks with a sarnie, I see.'

He grimaced as the pathetic riposte fell from his slack jaw. Even the old dear behind the till seemed to wince, her bushy eyebrows cringing beneath her beehive hairdo.

But Annie was smiling coyly at him, holding her hands behind her back.

'Well, I'm here and I'm hungry, sure. I was waiting for you.'

Guy blinked, plopped an Earl Grey into a plastic cup. 'You were?'

She took a step towards him, still smiling seductively. 'You've done something with your hair.'

'Er. . . I've not washed it for a couple of days. . . ' He scooshed scalding water into the cup, setting the tag on the teabag dancing like his heart.

'Hurry up and pay for them, would you?' called the crone behind the till. 'I want to close up.'

Annie glared at her. Guy shrugged, turned swiftly to the coffee machine for a cup of instant and walked over to the till. His vision kept misting over, though his eyes weren't stinging. But he didn't have to see clearly to know Annie had come up right behind him. He could smell her perfume, no reek of smoke and lager about her now.

'Whoops,' said the crone, as she knocked the tea from his grasp. He yelped in surprise, but the hot water splashed over Annie's hand. She shrieked and jumped back.

A bread knife, still covered in crumbs from lunchtime's ciabattas, fell from her fingers and clattered to the floor.

'Sorry,' the crone told Annie. And winked at Guy.

He stared down at the knife, then up at Annie. She stared at him in confusion. Then she blushed and fled the tea bar without another word.

'Have another tea on the house,' said the crone, squeezing his arm. 'A couple of Kit-Kats too, if you like. And take good care, eh?'

Guy left the tea bar with his complimentary snacks, in a baffled daze. What the hell had all *that* been about? Why had Annie been holding a knife secrete-ively like that? Had she held some kind of mad grudge all this time? Was she a total psycho?

He walked shakily to the lifts, a faint fog still misting his vision. He set down the cups, rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands, but it made no 13

difference.

With a shuddering rattle, the lift doors opened. A tall, lean man with straggly brown hair that was greying round the temples stepped out and gave him a cheery smile.

And raised a large spanner.

Guy recoiled, backing away in alarm.

'Hey, calm down,' said the man, who managed to look scruffy even in his spotless overalls. He wiped his long straight nose. 'Lift maintenance.'

'Right,' said Guy uncertainly. 'Sorry.'

The man nodded, apparently placated. 'It's not like I'm going to hit you with it or anything, is it?' He lowered the wrench and sauntered off round the corner.

Guy was suddenly suspicious. Contractors were supposed to wear little laminated name badges for security reasons – it had taken a sub-committee three months to hit upon that little plan, and Security had been instructed to enforce it with no exceptions. And there wasn't a spot of dirt on the bloke's uniform. . .

Wondering what to do, Guy was more relieved than surprised when Mike pushed open the stairwell doors and lumbered out into the corridor towards him. 'Mike,' he said, 'don't suppose you saw the lift maintenance man upstairs, did you?'

'Guy Adams, that's a vicious rumour!' Mike chirped. 'I'm not seeing anyone!'

I'm not about to crap on my own doorstep, am I?'

With that, he cheerily seized Guy by the throat and began to throttle the life out of him.

The shock of it paralysed Guy for several seconds, and by the time his brain had told him Mike wasn't joking around, another few had passed. The mist in his eyes was turning blood red, his pulse was pounding like hammer blows in his head. Guy gasped, choked, tried to struggle free, clawing at Mike's hands, kicking his shins, punching his gut. But Mike didn't react. His eyes were glazed, unseeing, as his fat fingers dug in harder under Guy's chin.

As Guy started to black out, the lift engineer rushed up and slapped the palms of his hands hard over Mike's ears. With a hoarse shout, Mike staggered back. Guy broke free at last and fell to the floor, his vision swamped by black blotches.

'Get out of here,' shouted the maintenance man, but Guy was too busy retching for breath to go anywhere. As his misty sight returned he saw his rescuer heft the huge spanner from out of his belt and wave it warningly at Mike, who barely seemed to notice. But it seemed Guy's boss was out to terminate more than just his contract for rummaging through his precious in-tray.

Taking another tack, the maintenance man threw his spanner to the floor. It hit Mike's toes and he bellowed in pain, hopping about on his good foot while he clutched the other.

The maintenance man opened the lift doors and shoved Mike through them.

The doors closed again and with a rattle and a *ping!* the lift heaved upwards, taking Mike away.

'He tried to kill me,' Guy gasped.

'How long had you taken with those teas?' the man enquired.

Guy smiled weakly, massaged his neck. 'Thanks, anyway, whoever you are.'

He noticed a small huddle of confused people gathering at one end of the corridor. The maintenance man looked at it worriedly, prompting Guy to ask:

'What is it now?'

'I told you to get out of here,' the man said.

'My coat, my bag, they're upstairs –'

'Never mind all that. Just go.' He waved his spanner sheepishly. 'I'd offer you a lift, but. . . '

Guy wondered if his accrued flexitime hours would allow him to leave at 3.30 p.m. But he decided permission from Mike right now was unlikely.

'Are you all right?' a middle-aged woman asked.

'He's fine!' said the maintenance man loudly. 'Nothing to see here!' To Guy he hissed: 'Move it! I'll hold them off!'

'I really did fall asleep at my desk,' muttered Guy, as he stumbled over to the stairwell. 'It's a dream. All a dream.'

Outside, the afternoon was cool and crisp. Guy started shaking the moment he stepped out of Nobel House. His entire soft-pedal world of comfortable torpor had been trashed inside ten minutes. A girl he barely knew had sidled up to him with a bread knife, and his own boss had just tried to strangle him.

For real. They must be in it together. . .

What had he done to deserve this? Tried to earn a few brownie points by clearing a few nothing things from the man's desk. So much for that. Guy remembered the temp – had Mike tried to strangle her too? Was his entire office lying wrecked now with her slender body buckled in its centre? And what about the old dear with the well-aimed tea and the lift engineer – they'd saved him but shown no surprise. What did they know that he didn't? It had to be a joke; some kind of sick new reality TV thing. . .

But Mike hadn't been putting it on for the cameras.

The noise of traffic and the wet stink of the Thames came at last to his jangled senses. He'd crossed Millbank in a daze and was halfway across Lambeth 15

Bridge, heading for his flat on autopilot. He stopped, forced himself to calm down and fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette.

Looking out from the bridge, the grey-brown river curved in a wide arc away from him. He lit up, the smoke like the mist still lacing his vision. He blinked furiously as he tried to focus on the scene before him. The tugboats, black and red and rusty on the water. Dowdy, flaking cruise ships, bobbing about hoping to catch the eye of tourists. The man in vest and pants breaking the river's murky surface in a powerful crawl, swimming towards him, then waving his hands either in welcome or warning. . .

The cigarette slipped from Guy's gaping mouth. The man, obviously a nut, caught the ciggie adroitly between his thumb and forefinger. Guy glanced about, suddenly suspicious for any sign of hidden cameras. Nothing.

'I say!' the man called, his wet dark curls plastered against his face. 'Those can kill you, you know.'

Guy sighed and pulled out another cigarette. 'The way today's going, they'll have to be quick.'

'Not the cigarettes,' the man called back, gesturing that Guy should look behind him. 'I was referring to the knitting needles.'

Uh-oh.

Guy whirled round and found his gran rushing at him with a long grey

needle in each hand, like some demented pensioner samurai. Passers-by screamed as the old woman threw herself at him. He reeled back, twisted round, and with a shriek, Granny went over the parapet.

‘Gran!’ yelled Guy, swearing in disbelief as she hit the murk with a mighty splash. The man in the water ducked back under and resurfaced with her in his arms. She was staring about, bedraggled and bewildered.

‘Gran,’ he shouted, his voice cracking as his misty eyes welled up with tears.

‘For God’s sake, *why*?’

‘She’ll be all right,’ the man called. ‘She’s in shock. But someone or something’s out to get you, Guy Adams.’ He started kicking back in the water, towing Gran safe and unstruggling through the water towards the riverbank.

‘Don’t go home tonight, it isn’t safe!’

Guy couldn’t speak. He shrugged helplessly.

‘103 Galbraith Road. Flat D,’ shouted the man, spitting out a grisly mouthful of the Thames. ‘Wait there for Anji. You’ll be safe!’

Guy saw his latest guardian angel reach the side, and watched incredulously as his gran was dragged safely up on to dry land. Then he started to run, away from the crowds that had gathered, from the tourists taking snaps and home movies of the insane scene.

Galbraith Road? Where was that? What psycho ward had that nut escaped from and who the buggering hell was Anji?

16

How was *any* of this happening?

He was getting home, locking the door, phoning Julie and staying in for the rest of his life.

He trooped up his grey street in Stockwell, too tired to run any more. There were plenty of people about, but that was small comfort; he felt any of them might attack him as soon as look at him.

Home at last. As he struggled to turn his key in the stiff lock he heard raised voices. Pushing open the door he saw the man downstairs, his

fat fifty-year-old frame squeezed into black leathers, rummaging through the utility cupboard in the communal hallway. He was yelling at his wife.

‘It’s been pinched! This would never have happened if your stupid nose weren’t so bleedin’ *sensitive*!’ He pronounced the word with a savagery Guy found astonishing. ‘D’you think I can afford to give petrol away?’ The man noticed him. His tone didn’t soften. ‘You ain’t seen my petrol can anywhere have you? Only filled the swine yesterday.’

‘Sorry, mate,’ Guy stammered, pushed past him and bolted upstairs before something horrible could happen.

When he reached his front door, he found it ajar. Hadn’t he locked it this morning?

His eyes seemed to be getting mistier as he walked inside. ‘Hello?’

Julie was lying on the couch. Asleep.

‘Jules? What are you doing here?’

Asleep with a purple bruise on her forehead. Beside her, on a cushion, Guy saw his jacket neatly folded on top of his briefcase. He frowned. He’d left them in the office, how could –

‘Your girlfriend’s unconscious.’

Guy jumped. The Asian girl, the office temp, had stepped out of the bathroom.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ he demanded. ‘How did you get in?’

‘She let me in. Sort of,’ sighed the temp. ‘I knocked on your door, she opened it and tried to clobber me with a mallet.’

‘Sure she did.’ Guy noticed the hammer lying on the floor. ‘And yet she’s the one unconscious with the lump on her head. Did you hit Mike as well? Is that what turned him crazy?’

The temp gestured down the hallway. ‘You can check out the dent in your wall back there if you like.’

‘Why would Julie want to attack you?’

‘She thought I was you.’

Guy threw up his hands. ‘Oh, right, of course, I was forgetting. It’s Everyone Kill Guy Adams Day today, isn’t it?’

17

‘Yes, quite frankly, it *is*.’ The new girl’s eyes flashed, she was losing patience too. ‘But the Doctor’s found out about it and has volunteered us to watch over you.’

‘The doctor? Whose doctor?’

‘Does it matter? You can trust him.’ She marched up to him. ‘So how about a little gratitude? You think I wanted to sit all day in your crappy office for four pounds an hour? Listening to your boss’s so-called jokes and you clicking your tongue every two seconds?’

‘I don’t click my tongue!’ Guy protested.

‘And then when I bring your stupid gear back and nearly get my brains knocked out by your psycho girlfriend –’

A shriek from the sofa made them both turn. Julie – looking very attractive in a floaty red dress that nicely offset her blonde hair – was running at him, face twisted in rage, wielding the hammer.

Guy froze in disbelief.

But before the blow could fall, the temp punched Julie’s lights out. A straight right to the jaw, and his girl went down.

The temp sulkily rubbed her bruised knuckles while Guy, trembling, stared down at Julie.

‘You are so dumped!’ he shouted at last.

‘Believe me now?’ the girl asked softly. ‘My name’s Anji, which you’d have known already if you actually took a few moments to treat your temps like human beings.’

‘Anji?’ Guy took an involuntary step back. ‘That nutter in the Thames told me to find you.’

‘That nutter is the Doctor,’ said Anji. ‘The lift engineer’s name is Fitz, and the old bag in the canteen is really a young bag called Trix.’

The door to the spare room suddenly opened. A little silhouette was framed against the window.

‘And while we’re doing the roll call,’ Anji went on, ‘who is that?’

‘My nephew!’ said Guy, baffled. ‘How did he get here? He’s only six.’ He stepped forwards. ‘Hey, Pete, where’s your mum then?’

‘I’ve been waiting for you to come home,’ Pete said plaintively.

‘Well, I’m here. But you shouldn’t be, should you? And this isn’t really the best of. . . ’ Guy glanced at Anji and down at Julie self-consciously, then shrugged and opened his arms. ‘Well, come on, then, better give your uncle a hug.’

Pete ran forwards happily and jumped into Guy’s arms. He swept the boy up and swung him round. Then frowned. Pete’s clothes felt wet.

‘Guy, put him down!’

Pete stank of petrol.

18

Guy heard the strike of little flints by his ear, a hiss of gas.

‘No!’ yelled Anji.

A whoosh of flames engulfed him. Pete clung to Guy’s neck and screamed as they burnt.

19

Three

Care in the community

Anji swore, grabbed the throw from the couch and billowed it out into a large tasselled rectangle. The flames were huge, engulfing the little boy. Guy over-toppled, crashed down to the floor on top of him, and Anji covered them both with the throw. Then she yanked down both curtains from the window and used them to swaddle the smouldering bundle. The room stank of burnt hair and flesh.

‘Are you all right?’ Anji felt sick to her stomach. ‘Guy, are you all right?’

‘Can’t breathe,’ he choked, and Anji pulled the curtains away from his head.

He was shivering with shock, his face blackened and red, but the burns didn’t look too serious. Not compared to those of Pete beneath him.

Anji opened the window and stuck her head out. She caught two sweet lungfuls of fummy South London air, then turned back to the stench of the living room.

‘We should call an ambulance. In the meantime, get his clothes off,’ she ordered. ‘The flames are out but he’ll still be burning. I’ll wet some blankets to try to cool his skin. And yours too, OK?’

Guy nodded dumbly, pulled softly at his squirming nephew’s clothes.

While she called 999 and soaked blankets in the bath, Anji surveyed the scene: Julie lying bruised and spreadeagled on the floor, Pete whimpering and clutching himself, too stunned even for tears. Her and Guy in the middle of it all like Bonnie and Clyde gone wacko. ‘We have to get out of here before the ambulance arrives,’ Anji said. ‘Too many questions. We could be tied up with the police for hours.’

‘We can’t just leave him here,’ Guy said softly.

‘The ambulance will be here soon. First sound of sirens, we get going.’ She gave him a sympathetic smile. ‘Pete’ll get proper care.’

‘My sister will kill me.’

Anji nodded. ‘Very likely, on today’s evidence.’

Guy gently pressed his fingers to his sticky, reddened face. ‘I think I need the hospital too.’

‘No, Guy. You need a Doctor.’ She wrapped Pete in the damp blankets and swabbed at him gently. Anji prayed that the boy’s injuries looked worse than 21

they were. ‘We have to get you away from anyone who knows you, for *their* sake as much as yours. I’ve got a car outside.’ She sighed, shook her head.

‘Christ, I sound like a third-rate gangster.’

‘And what if you try to kill me too?’ said Guy sullenly.

‘You may not have noticed but I just saved your life twice.’ Anji could hear distant sirens already, and gestured to Julie. ‘If you’d rather hang around to cry on *her* shoulder. . . ’

‘OK,’ Guy muttered.

Anji didn’t drive away until they’d seen the paramedics carry Pete and Julie into the back of the ambulance. Guy sat slumped in the MG’s passenger seat, his sandy-brown hair a worse mess than before, a glazed look on his not unhandsome face.

She looked at him more closely. He was in his mid-twenties, his eyes were green, his nose short and straight with a bulbous tip. Cute in a grubby sort of way; you could imagine him (once the burns had healed up, of course) fronting some shoegazing band like Travis or Coldplay more than you could working out fishing subsidies in Westminster. Then again, did she look like the type who travelled through time and space?

The type who’d used to travel through time and space, anyway.

Now she was finally back in her own world, in her own time, nothing was about to make her leave it again. And as soon as the Doctor had sorted whatever was causing this weird stuff around Guy and moved on, she would have her flat back. *She* could move on, too.

And she could barely wait.

‘How’re you doing?’ she asked Guy.

He clicked his tongue. ‘Don’t prompt a ten-minute diatribe you may not feel like hearing.’

‘Good plan.’ Anji started the car. ‘You can phone the hospital from my place.’

The drive to her Docklands flat took over an hour. Guy had passed most of it alternating between lengthy silences and doing the tongue-clicking thing.

Anji turned the radio up to drown him out. It was amazing how much better everything seemed just being back in her old car and listening to some un-challenging R’n’B on the stereo. She felt she fitted again. Though she felt bad for Guy and what he must be going through right now, it was hard to control the smile that kept tugging at her cheeks.

At least until she saw the little girl.

A quick chill shuddered through Anji, like someone wasn't so much walking over her grave as jumping up and down on it. The girl was a skinny thing, 22

standing by the TARDIS, which the Doctor had landed with unexpected accuracy just round the corner from Anji's flat. She was a little older than Pete, maybe eight or nine, with long blonde hair and wonky eyes that looked. . .

wrong, somehow. They were milky blue, a touch freakish. And staring right at Anji.

The girl had a bulky bag on her back and a dolly tucked under one arm, and clutched a dog lead with both hands. Her dog sat beside her, watching her intently, but the girl had adoring eyes just for Anji.

Anji took the corner too fast, trying to get out of view.

'Thought you weren't trying to kill me,' grumbled Guy as he was thrown against the passenger door.

'Keep up the tongue clicking,' Anji told him, 'and it's a whole new ball game.'

Anji said she lived on the 22nd floor. It was another world, thought Guy, stepping through the chrome and glass reception area and into the plush lift.

He rested his burnt, sore cheek against the cool mirror; it felt good.

'You make a good living, then,' he observed.

She nodded enthusiastically. 'Yeah, I get a bounty for every civil servant I hand over to the satanic authorities I work for.'

'That isn't funny.'

'But more interesting than explaining about how I lost the great job I used to have in the City, and the advantages of a flexible mortgage.'

Guy considered. 'That, admittedly, is true.'

She hit the button, bit her lip. 'I'm sorry for being happy.'

'Don't be. Your radiance is aggravating my burns, but apart from that

it's not a problem.'

'It's just I've been away from home for ages.'

'Travelling?'

'Like you wouldn't believe.' Anji smiled at him. 'It's going to be OK. The Doctor will sort things out.'

Guy grimaced. 'The Doctor goes swimming in the Thames in his vest and pants. Physician, heal thyself.'

'He should have something that'll help heal those burns.'

The lift opened and Anji led the way to her front door. The communal hall was spotless, and Guy felt conspicuously scruffy. He clicked his tongue absent-mindedly, until Anji silenced him with a well-placed Gucci heel on his foot.

She sighed contentedly as her key turned in the lock and the door swung open. 'Home. Go inside, they'll all be waiting.'

'Terrific. Can't I call the hospital first?'

23

'Let's do the introductions first. You can ask the Doctor about how your gran's doing. . . '

As he followed her inside, Guy had the strangest feeling he was meeting potential in-laws or employers or something, people he had to impress. Anji showed him in to a small yet tastefully minimalist living room that made him ache with envy, and he saw them – the bizarre characters that had haunted this most dismal of days, now all squashed up together on a small leather sofa.

He had to come to this bunch for explanations, for protection?

'Guy Adams,' said Anji, 'meet your saviours and benefactors. From left to right, Fitz. . . '

The gangly lift engineer. He'd changed out of his blue overalls; now he was wearing a yellow T-shirt and maroon flares. His long legs were crossed, and he raised a palm and a lazy smile in laconic greeting.

' . . . Trix, or Mac, or Trixie or whatever she's calling herself today. . . '

This was the crone from the tea bar? Scraps of latex still clung to her smooth cheeks; she looked to be about his age. She pulled off the teetering white wig and placed it in her lap, stroking it like Blofeld's cat. Her real hair was short, blonde and spiky.

'Trix, today,' the girl said.

'As in Domina-trix,' Fitz added helpfully.

'But I'm thinking of changing it to Famished. Jeez, Anji, you've got a perfectly good freezer compartment in your fridge with nothing inside! Don't you keep ready meals for emergencies?'

'She had some cheese in the fridge,' Fitz pointed out.

Anji frowned. 'I did not.'

Fitz looked worriedly at the empty plate he'd placed by his long brown loafers and swallowed hard. But the nutter the other side of Trix was taking Guy's attention; he was fidgeting with barely restrained energy like an overlooked pupil desperate to prove he knows the answers.

'And this', said Anji finally, 'is the Doctor.'

'How do you do!' The Doctor beamed. 'It's a pleasure to meet you. You must be very important, very special indeed, for some as yet unknown force to have possessed the minds of those who know you and targeted you for death.'

An uncomfortable silence ensued.

'Coffee, anyone?' asked Anji.

Fitz, Trix and Guy spoke as one: 'Please.'

Anji had to give Guy credit: he'd adjusted to the weirdness of the whole set-up fairly quickly. She guessed it helped to know that his gran was safe being held overnight at the hospital along Albert Embankment, and that Pete was doing well in Camberwell.

Trix had made the call, posing as an elderly relative and ringing off when the nurse got nosy. The Doctor had asked her not to tell Guy that Pete would be in hospital for several days, and that some serious scarring was inevitable.

He had enough to worry about.

At least the Doctor had been able to give Guy some magic cream for his own burns, promising a full physical check-up in the morning once he'd recovered a little from his various ordeals. For herself, Anji was just happy that poor old Julie had walked out of A&E puzzled but all-clear after a number of X-rays.

She looked down at her bruised fist ruefully.

A thought struck her after Guy had retired to her spare bedroom. 'Doctor,'

she asked as she cleared away the small mountain of coffee cups that now littered the living room – playing the perfect host since Trix evidently wasn't about to play the good guest – 'Will Julie remember me? The police must have questioned her by now, surely? What if I'm wanted for GBH or something?'

'Don't worry, Anji,' Fitz said, stretching his skinny white arms in the air.

'They'll like you in Holloway. You'll get by.'

She smiled sweetly at Trix. 'Any tips for me?'

Trix smiled and shrugged. 'Sorry, Anji. Never been caught. Maybe you can compile a few for me, in case I ever start slipping.'

'I doubt if this Julie will remember much about anything,' said the Doctor mildly, looking up from a local newspaper that must've been months old. 'She was compelled to act on magnified emotions – blurs the mental processes. . . '

Fitz rubbed his eyes and blinked blearily. 'Come again?'

'I'll explain later.'

Anji scowled at him. 'I seem to recall hearing that before.'

'I mean it!' The Doctor yawned noisily, opened another newspaper and leafed through to the property section. 'I'll explain once I'm sure. There's been altogether too much guesswork in my life recently.'

'So. . . ' Fitz looked between Anji and Trix with studied nonchalance. 'What are the sleeping arrangements?'

‘Yeah, it’s a bit poky, mate.’ Trix tutted. ‘No offence.’

‘None taken,’ Anji assured her, quietly seething. ‘Well, I’m going to sleep in my own bed, you three can fight it out for who gets the sofa.’

‘Might as well kip in the TARDIS,’ Fitz observed dourly.

‘I know a place you can stay,’ murmured the Doctor, still absorbed by the freesheet.

Anji shrugged. ‘Whatever.’ She felt suddenly happy and drowsy, intoxicated by the thought of climbing into her own bed, and resting her head on her own pillow. ‘It’s so good to be back home, isn’t it?’

‘Don’t get too attached to it,’ cautioned the Doctor airily, rustling through another few pages. ‘Something’s got big plans for this universe, and with 25

Sabbath involved the Earth must be at the epicentre of its plans.’

‘Thanks for that, Doctor,’ grumbled Anji. ‘Sweet dreams to you too.’

At that, the Doctor looked up, wounded. ‘Oh, but it’s all right!’ He smiled slyly at his friends. ‘I have the rudiments of a plan myself.’

‘Like taking back the journal?’ asked Trix.

Fitz frowned. ‘Yeah, I thought that was the first thing we had to do to stabilise all this?’

‘All in good time.’ The Doctor leaned back on the sofa, and covered his face with the open newspaper. ‘I’m just going to have a long blink. . .’

Trix sighed, and Fitz raised his eyebrows in a ‘what can you do?’ look at Anji.

She nodded and went to bed.

The sheets weren’t as fresh as they might be but Anji was too tired to change them. Sleep didn’t come as easily to her as she’d imagined. She heard Fitz clonking about outside, Guy’s rhythmic snores from the room next door. She couldn’t relax; surely the pillow hadn’t been this lumpy before she’d gone away?

And with the lights out, she kept seeing Pete on fire, and that freaky little girl with the dog and the dolly.

The girl was standing by the bed, looking down at her. *I have a secret*, her eyes seemed to say.

Anji gasped, sat bolt upright.

There was nothing in the room but the rosy orange of street lamps, creeping under the blind. No girl.

Anji fell back into a fitful sleep. She kept thinking the girl was there in the room, watching her.

As she lay in the dark and slipped between waking and sleeping she could picture the Doctor in her kitchen, sat at the table in his shirtsleeves with a pot of tea. She swore she could hear a slow tapping from the back door that led to the fire escape. The chair scraped against the polished wooden floorboards as he got up and opened the door to the night outside.

The girl, her dolly and her dog were waiting outside.

‘Hello again,’ said the Doctor.

26

Four

Flashbacks

The girl has read about it; about the moment the Doctor was doomed to arrive back in his own universe.

And she knows what Anji was thinking, of course.

‘What do you mean?’ Anji yelled, chasing through the TARDIS’s long dark corridors after the Doctor. ‘Why am I a genius? What did I do?’

‘Pre-credits sequence!’ cried the Doctor. He breezed up to the main console and flicked a multitude of switches. The lights began to rise again. ‘A beginning before the beginning!’

‘What’s he talking about?’ Fitz whispered in her ear. Anji shrugged.

‘You remember I tried to steer us to another galaxy?’ The Doctor looked despairingly at them. ‘I wanted to see if we could breach a Charged Vacuum Emboitement, slip into a *genuinely* different universe!’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Fitz. ‘That.’

Anji remembered something of his rationale. ‘You thought we could slip into our own universe the back way, was that it?’

‘Precisely. But the old girl wouldn’t budge. She’s sat here clinging to Earth like she’s afraid to let go. . . and thanks to you – and the TARDIS’s own somewhat graphic demonstration – *I know why!*’

‘This is where we ask you to explain everything to us like we’re infants,’

sighed Fitz. ‘Go on, then.’

‘Thank you.’ The Doctor cleared his throat. ‘The TARDIS hasn’t wanted to leave Earth because she’s so familiar with your planet’s history, it’s so well documented. Away from the Earth, her chronometers simply don’t function.

She drifts, unable to calibrate a single date once out of this solar system.’

Fitz frowned. ‘How do you know?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Because it happened – four days ago. I forced her to go against her wishes, and we were nearly set adrift for ever.’

Anji turned to Fitz. ‘No wonder he was so arsey.’

‘Luckily, the old thing found her way back home.’ The Doctor grinned. ‘But she’s made her point, hasn’t she? Her time navigational systems don’t function properly away from the Earth, the place where all this chaos started. She can’t 27

predict the location of planets in their various orbits, can’t piece together the geo-temporal relationship of the galaxies – because the great celestial clock she works to never *started* anywhere but here!’

‘Meaning?’ Fitz asked him resignedly.

The Doctor opened his mouth but it was Trix who spoke. Everyone jumped at the sound of her voice as she clopped elegantly into the console room in high heels and a black evening gown.

‘It’s the Big Bang, isn’t it?’

The Doctor looked at her, aghast. Then he turned petulant. ‘Yes, it is.’

Trix beamed at Fitz and Anji. ‘Thought so. Big Bang equals opening credits of the whole universe. And before that. . .’

‘But there was nothing before the Big Bang,’ Anji protested.

‘Then that “nothing” must equal the pre-credits sequence,’ reasoned Trix calmly. ‘At least in the Doctor’s head. Or he’d hardly have used the metaphor in the first place.’

Anji glowered at her. ‘Hadn’t realised what an Einstein you were.’

Trix shrugged. ‘I don’t understand what he’s getting at – only how he got there.’

The Doctor looked at them indignantly. ‘Who’s giving this explanation?’

‘And what’s the Big Bang again?’ added Fitz, presumably having just managed to tear his gaze away from Trix’s legs.

‘It’s the start of this universe,’ said the Doctor before anyone else could interrupt. ‘The spontaneous formation of matter from total void – superheated matter that expanded and cooled and formed. . .’ He gestured wildly round his ship. ‘Formed everything! Everything from nothing at all!’

‘That’s so cool,’ said Fitz, grinning.

‘Isn’t it?’ The Doctor beamed. ‘And that “nothing at all” – that absolute nothing – is precious treasure. It’s what makes this universe the one that really matters – because it has a precise beginning and one day it’ll reach a natural end. That’s how the TARDIS can find its way around the universe, which is ultimately a closed, predictable system.’

Anji sneaked a look at Trix, and was glad to see she looked just as baffled as the rest of them.

‘Listen. Most of our universe is made up of dark matter, stuff that neither absorbs nor reflects light, but which exerts a gravitational force. And more than half the *energy* in our universe is dark, practically undetectable, not generated by matter or radiation. Yet these are the concepts, the metaphysical facts that explain our expanding cosmos.’ The Doctor peered down at the readouts on the console. ‘I reckoned as much,’ he murmured. ‘In this universe there’s no trace.’

‘If it’s dark matter and energy,’ reasoned Fitz, ‘maybe you just can’t see it?’

28

‘Fitz. You know what’s out there right now? What accounts for ninety-nine per cent of matter?’ He looked searchingly at Trix as if daring her to answer. ‘Plasma. Hot, electrically conducting gases. A universe strewn by vast electrical currents and magnetic fields – ordered by electromagnetism as much as gravity – where galaxies have formed in ultracusters that have taken scores and scores of billions of years to form.’

Anji’s brain felt like mush. ‘So where did *this* universe begin?’

‘It didn’t. It has no beginning and no end. It has *always been* – growing slowly, agglomerating matter in giant strands twisting across space.’

‘But everything has a beginning,’ Trix protested. ‘Where did all the matter in space come from if not from the Big Bang?’

‘The Big Bang doesn’t explain where all that matter actually came from, does it?’ Anji happily scored a point to herself. ‘And it doesn’t explain what gathered it all together into a little ball, what made it explode, or what was there before.’

‘They’re both impossible to understand,’ Fitz said wisely, ‘so who cares?’

Life’s too short to worry about it.’

‘But it’s incredible, isn’t it? Just imagine.’ The Doctor was staring out, enraptured by the starfield on the scanner. ‘No boundaries. Worlds without number, knowledge without limits. I could explore forever and ever and never reach the end.’

Fitz cleared his throat meaningfully. ‘How does all this help us?’

‘What?’ The Doctor seemed to drag himself back to them. ‘Well. . . if the TARDIS can go back in time to just after the Big Bang in our universe and *hold* that point while we slip through the dimensions. . . ’

Trix finished his sentence: ‘We’ll know that if we’re ripped apart by the primal forces of creation, we’re back in our own universe. Great!’

‘There’s a risk involved, of course there is,’ snapped the Doctor,

suddenly angry. 'I don't know if the TARDIS can stand those forces, but *I* can't stand to be lost any longer. We've *got* to get back – before there's nothing to get back *to*.'

Fitz, Anji and Trix all looked at each other nervously. Until Fitz, reliable as ever, changed the subject.

'Trix, why are you wearing a dress?'

'What, this old thing?' Trix smiled. She knew she looked good, all dolled up to impress the boys. 'Why not? Dress up nice, something nice'll happen to you. That's what my poor old mum used to say.'

'Right,' said Anji, unconvinced. Trix was one hundred per cent fake. You couldn't believe a word she said.

'And it worked, didn't it?' She placed a hand on the Doctor's shoulder and beamed at him. 'Looks like we're going back home, thanks to our resident 29

genius!'

'It's a fetching design,' said the Doctor stiffly. 'But you'll remember to replace it in the TARDIS wardrobe before you leave us, won't you?'

Trix's smile faltered. 'Whatever.'

Anji was glad the Doctor wasn't taken in by Trix the way Fitz seemed to be. Of course, he was a sucker for a pretty girl with a sob story, and Trix had a million different ones at her fingertips: hints of a tragic past, a loveless childhood, uncaring partners. . . all ready to spring on him the moment she wanted something.

Trix's hand slipped from the Doctor's shoulder as he moved round the console, flicking switches and yanking levers. 'To pull this off,' he said, 'we'll have to push the TARDIS to its limits. . . '

The breakthrough didn't happen straight away of course. They may have found the key, but the door it opened remained as lost and out of reach as ever. It was going to take time. Fitz suggested to Trix that they dramatise this latest development for his film. Anji went back to her room and loaded Fitz's latest tape. She looked at the latest entries in his cheerful montage of dead and dying Earths, and wondered how the movie would end.

Anji was asleep when the TARDIS broke through into. . .

No. There were no words for it, none that could hope to do justice to the seething force of that very first recorded second of existence, the obliterating moment of creation.

Like Fitz and Trix, Anji had been drugged.

The time ship had thoughtfully dimmed its lights a little before midnight, suggesting sleep to its occupants. With the warm-up complete, the Doctor came round with a mug of laced cocoa for everybody. He sensed the time of discovery was near – very possibly the time of his own ending. The crucial point had slithered sluglike, closer and closer. Now he wanted to face it alone, not with the tiring chatter of the children about him. If they didn't make it through, their little lives would end without fear.

Anji would never know this, for Chloe would take the knowledge to the grave. She was good at keeping secrets, and the Doctor had many.

She had passed through the twisted, buckling walls of his blue box and watched him play among the debris of his ship's controls.

'Nothing works!' he was shrieking over and over, wild haired and terrified, the captain sinking with his ship.

Jamais had barked, the sound stretching the moment into minutes. The Doctor glanced up at them, recoiled in shock; then composed himself once more as he breathed the healing seconds, careful time like air restoring the console, coaxing life back into its shattered motors.

30

The Event washed the big little craft forward 80 million years. The first stars hadn't switched on yet. The universe was dark, hatching possibilities.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor. Chloe watched him come cautiously closer.

'We've helped you,' she explained. 'So now you have to do some favours for us.'

'Favours?' the Doctor looked oddly at her.

'Make me a promise,' she announced with a crafty smile. And they talked for a little while, and she showed him some pages from her

special book.

‘We’ll be meeting you again,’ she told him by way of farewell, and patted the heavy leather volume wistfully. ‘It says so in here.’

She could feel the Doctor’s eyes on her as Jamais took her away, out into the darkness in silence.

31

Five

The week before today

‘Hi.’ Jacqui smiled at the couple on her doorstep. ‘You must be friends of Daniel.’

‘Ralf Canonshire,’ the man announced. He was tall and lean in an expensive suit, clean-shaven, his thick hair plastered with gel and combed back from his forehead. ‘This is my wife, Susan.’

Susan nodded bored acknowledgement. She wore an elegant dress as black as her long hair with a scoop neck that left little to the imagination. Jacqui felt her nerves buzz as she checked out the woman’s green eyes. There was something catlike and dangerous about them.

Jacqui checked their names on the list and beckoned them inside.

‘Is Daniel here?’ asked Ralf, as they followed her into the kitchen.

‘He’s due any minute.’ A couple Jacqui didn’t know were kissing and grop-ing furiously up against the wall. Susan acted like they weren’t there; after a couple of moments so did Ralf.

Jacqui beamed at them both. ‘Please, may I fix you a drink?’

Susan was looking at her, scrutinising her at least as critically as Jacqui did herself in the mirror morning, noon and night, and clearly reaching no nice conclusions. Jacqui knew she was ugly. Knew her straight fine hair flopped about as lifelessly as the rest of her, knew her nose was too big and her teeth like tombstones, and her chest as flat as her conversation. But Daniel liked her place – Mum’s old place – in Holland Park, and so sometimes he let her host his little parties. They were glamorous and wild, a place where like and dirty minds could meet. Daniel made the world seem such a wicked place Jacqui

could barely stand the thrill of it.

‘Scotch and soda,’ said Ralf. He was good looking in an angular sort of way.

‘And a straight gin for Susan.’

‘Do you have an orange?’ Susan asked huskily.

‘Sure,’ said Jacqui. She pulled one from the fruit bowl.

Susan dug one glossy red nail into the orange and tore a hole in the skin.

She held it to her straight, sharp nose then squeezed three drops into the gin.

She turned to Ralf and raised the glass. ‘To impossible dreams,’ she said.

‘Made reality,’ smiled Ralf in return. Their glasses clinked.

33

Jacqui led them through the living room past small huddles of people who talked and smoked and drank, or lay together on ermine rugs.

‘Have you been friends with Daniel long?’ she asked brightly.

Ralf shook his head. ‘It’s not easy being Daniel’s friend.’ Jacqui nodded in deep sympathy as he went on. ‘So much cloak and dagger stuff.’

‘We don’t mind,’ said Susan, ‘as long as any point all this has is suitably sharp.’

Jacqui nodded gaily. ‘You’re dressed to the nines, Susan.’

‘Do you know the source of that silly phrase?’ Susan smiled thinly when Jacqui shook her head. ‘Nine was considered a mystical number, long ago.

It connotes perfection.’ She tipped her head to one side, sipped her drink, tittered softly. ‘Nine’s my lucky number.’

‘You’ve as many lives,’ agreed Ralf.

‘And I want to take as many,’ she said softly.

Jacqui flushed and showed them into the box room. Ralf sat on the single bed, and Susan chose the chair at the small dresser. ‘Daniel’s got you down for a private consultation,’ she explained.

‘I should hope so,’ said Susan, with a lascivious look at her husband. She pulled a small velvet pouch from her Hermes purse. ‘We have everything we need, I take it?’

She poured out a trickle of diamonds into Ralf’s hand. They sparkled in his sweating palm.

Jacqui took a deep, shivery breath. ‘Oh, yeah.’

A deep voice behind her made her jump: ‘I’m pleased to see you’re not wasting my time.’

She spun round to find Daniel framed in the doorway. He was a tall, broad American in his forties, his grey hair neatly combed and parted, his dark suit tailored and expensive. But he sweated a lot, and his subtle cologne never managed to swamp his own odour. Money and dirt, he stank of. But Jacqui didn’t mind. She took anything he cared to give her, his stink included.

‘Wait outside, Jacqui.’

She nodded, bit her lip and slunk away. ‘Good girl,’ Daniel muttered, not sparing her a second glance.

Jacqui waited outside the door. She loved to listen to Daniel; his transatlantic drawl spoke of cocktails and big deals; it was intoxicating.

‘The down-payment is satisfactory,’ he said. She heard the stiff rustle of photographic paper. ‘This is the man. You want to kill him? Be my guest. You’ve seen the testimonials, met the satisfied customers. You know our organisation delivers.’

A pause, then Susan spoke: ‘And we can do what we like to him?’

‘Anything. So long as you leave him dead by the end of it. There’s no hassle, no fuss. No comeback. Just tell us when you want to do it and we’ll be there to clean everything away. It’s guaranteed.’

‘This’, said Ralf, ‘is going to be fun.’ And Jacqui walked away to see what else was happening in her happening flat, giddy and quite weak at the knees.

35

Six

Back at the beginning

There’s no light, no space, no time passing. But at the beginning of the universe there are again three people watching: Chloe, her friend Jamais, and Chloe’s dolly.

Chloe pats Jamais’s glossy black head. He has counted back another slow minute of his own time. He is good at counting, better than she is. She is better at reading.

There’s that tiny ball of matter that the universe will spring from like a cheap conjuring trick. The beauty and the majesty of the Event are nothing to Chloe, though she supposes that might change were she allowed to grow older and see things as grown-ups do.

Today, for now, it’s just boring. Everything is boring. And her bottom still stings from its spanking.

Chloe and Jamais have been told off for talking to strangers. Chloe knows it was wrong, but she had to see the Doctor again. His arrival means things are coming to an end, or to a different beginning; she can’t tell which, but she knows he’s the one who will make it all happen. She wishes she could tell him more, wishes she knew everything herself.

Jamais wants Chloe’s attention. He’s been beaten too, and he skulks about mournfully with an over-pronounced limp. He likes to lay it on thick. But Chloe is concentrating on her book, while Jamais paces, while the little ball of universe waits dully among the nothingness. She’s reading aloud to her dolly.

‘He’s had lots of different names over the years, has Guy,’ she tells dolly.

Names are important to Chloe. That’s why she has never been able to choose one for dolly – she’s never been quite sure which would be just right. ‘He’s a very special man.’

Jamais barks his piteous best.

Chloe leans forward to her doll confidentially. 'We're not allowed to help him. But somebody should.'

She nods, and reaches out to make dolly do the same.

But Jamais is dry-nosed and cross, and snaps at Chloe's dolly before she can reach it. She screams and shouts as Jamais sinks his teeth into the doll's plastic skin, and shakes his broad, black head to and fro.

Chloe screams her loudest. Jamais cringes, drops the doll. Even the atom 37

in the Void trembles fit to burst.

Then, Chloe scoops up her wet dolly and cradles her. Her eyes narrow with spite for Jamais. He slinks off pretending not to care, but she can tell from his drooping gait how upset he is. He potters over to the atom and cocks a leg.

The yellow trickle sets it off – POOF!

BOOM!

And the universe is off again. So hot and fierce and powerful and vast, no words can. . .

The start of the universe is boring, boring, boring today.

Chloe blinks and is home again. She and Jamais are in the glitter room.

She rests her doll down at the lowliest foothills of the mountain of diamonds, with a firm look at Jamais. He cowers correctly, and she knows he won't be mean for some time. She smiles, to say she loves him still.

Then, together, they climb the sharp steps of the diamond pile. The stones grind and crackle against the soles of her shoes. Jamais burrows in and out of the gemstones with glee, his slippery form dark and dramatic against their dazzling light. Chloe laughs, slips, cuts herself on the sharp lines and edges but keeps climbing.

When she reaches the top she cheers, and Jamais bursts out beside her, his big head telescoped up on his long neck.

Chloe tickles his ear. 'Remember the first diamond? 800 BC. The Indian who won it from the riverbed. . . he gave it to me.'

Jamais looks about, panting, as if hoping to find it. But Chloe knows he is not really listening. He likes having his ear tickled too much.

'And look how many we have now.'

She turns Jamais's head to face her. His shiny dark eyes seem to say, *How come you're not bored with diamonds, Chloe?*

'Because they're magic,' she breathes. 'And they help me remember. Ancient peoples believed your soul could be reincarnated in a diamond as easily as in an animal or plant.' She sighs. 'Besides, I can never be bored with them. It says so in the book.'

Once, long ago, Chloe sneakily tried to flick forward to see what happened at the end of the story.

But terrible things happen if you read the book out of order.

She blinks, feeling the tug on her twisted eyelids. Yes, now she is happy to love diamonds forever.

Chloe weighs a dozen of them in her hand. Jamais nuzzles closer, his eyes sorry and soulful. He coughs a sad second or two in her face; she turns away but her fear lingers like the stale smell of sweat and cologne.

Footsteps sound in the white hallway outside, getting closer.

Terrible things happen, all the time.

38

Seven

Physical

Anji, all wrapped up in her cuddliest velour dressing gown, shuffled into the kitchen to find a topless Guy sat on the table with the Doctor pressing a stethoscope to his hairless chest. The poor lad blushed, probably aware he made a pretty pasty specimen.

'It's looking relatively normal right now,' Guy assured her as he self-consciously smoothed his quite remarkable bed-hair. 'You wouldn't believe the gadgets he's stuck all over me.'

‘Spare me the clinical details, please.’ Anji frowned to hide a smile. His hair looked sweet, all tousled. ‘So what’s the verdict, Doctor? Will he play the piano again?’

The Doctor took one of Guy’s hands and spread his fingers. ‘An octave’s span. Very good. Or you could’ve been.’ He looked at Guy earnestly. ‘You learned for a while when you were younger – isn’t that so? But you thought, only fourteen notes and all those records in the Top Forty each week. . . all the best songs will’ve been used up by the time I’m any good. Why bother?’

The Doctor patted Guy’s hand and let it go. ‘Never mind!’ he said cheerily.

Guy had started clicking his tongue nineteen to the dozen. He gave Anji a long freaked-out look, and she shivered. The Doctor would do this party trick from time to time. She wondered what he saw sometimes when he looked in her eyes, but decided she was happier he kept it to himself.

The Doctor packed away his stethoscope into a battered old Gladstone bag brimming with equipment. ‘Well, you seem to be in fair fettle, Guy. A bit flabbier than you could be, a higher cholesterol level than is strictly speaking healthy, and some fairly unusual genetic aberrations but –’

‘Whoa!’ Guy protested. ‘What do you mean, “genetic aberrations”?’

The Doctor pursed his lips. ‘You know, they made me sit up and take notice too when the DNA scanner highlighted them. But it’s nothing exciting. Some hereditary tic in your protein chains; bases and structures have done some shifting about.’ Guy looked blank. ‘I don’t think it’s much to worry about. And certainly not worth killing you for.’

‘Well, that’s good news, anyway,’ said Guy wryly.

‘Your burns have cleared up well,’ Anji noticed. ‘Barely a scar.’

39

Guy smiled tightly. ‘Not on the outside.’

‘Yes, that lotion’s very good,’ said the Doctor vaguely. ‘Do throw it away when you’ve finished with it though, won’t you?’

‘Sure.’ Guy slipped off the table and padded past Anji without another word, back to the spare room.

‘Were you telling the truth about this DNA thing?’ she asked quietly.

The Doctor didn’t seem hurt that she should ask. ‘Yes. The mutation is in the same prions that can cause mental disorders such as CJD and BSE.’ He raised a hand for silence before she could even open her mouth. ‘But relax, his codons haven’t altered for the worse, they don’t seem interested in creating anything nasty. They’re just *different*. They seem to have been that way since birth.’

He moved his bag from the table, and Anji noticed a small card had been lying beneath it. She craned her neck to read the name written across it in neat biroed capitals.

‘*Timeless*? Where did you pick that up?’

The Doctor casually stuffed it into his bag. ‘Special delivery. Food for thought. Speaking of which, I bet you’d like some breakfast.’

Anji watched him spring up and over to his designated change of subject, a miraculously full fridge. She smiled, letting it go for now, and gave him a brief round of applause. ‘Thanks for doing that.’

‘An army marches on its stomach.’ The Doctor pulled out three eggs and a bag of mushrooms and started hunting about for a frying pan.

‘Where’s Trix? Packed her bags and gone for good?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘And where’s Fitz? Sent him out for dessert?’

‘He’s on an errand. With Trix.’ He discovered the pristine pan in a high cupboard and brandished it like a trophy before putting it on the heat. ‘They may be some time. Good eggs.’

‘But can you make an omelette without breaking them?’ muttered Anji. ‘You know,’ she added more loudly, ‘I had some weird dreams last night. About a girl.’

‘Oh really?’ The Doctor busied himself cracking the eggs with an impish glee.

‘She had the strangest eyes. . . It was quite disturbing.’

He brat the mixture to within a sticky inch of its life. ‘A vivid imagination is a wonderful thing.’

‘I didn’t make her up. She was waiting outside last night.’

‘Not all last night,’ murmured the Doctor as he poured the eggs into the pan. The pan sizzled smokily in the little kitchen.

40

Anji sat at her table. Fitz’s journal, the thing that had snagged time’s thread and set the whole cosmos unravelling, was lying open at the last page.

‘What are you reading that for?’ Anji tapped the battered old book. ‘We’ve made it, haven’t we? Made it home. How come you’re suddenly not bothered about returning this to its proper place in 1938?’

‘Now that we’re here, I’m almost afraid to.’ The Doctor sighed as he chopped up the mushrooms. ‘Sabbath’s employers wanted a single, orderly reality – but if Fitz’s journal isn’t returned to its proper place they’re left with a fundamen-tally unstable universe that can never reconcile its inconsistencies, one which will ultimately unravel. They’ll be trying to put things right through Sabbath, just as we’ve been trying to put things right ourselves.’

‘Right. So, Sabbath will be up to another of his dopy schemes, desperate to ally himself with the next nasty to come slinking out of the vortex with a bunch of hollow promises.’

The Doctor looked up from his chopping. ‘Unless?’

Anji shivered. ‘Unless. . . he and they are waiting for us to do the job for them.’

‘That’s right. If we make it, if we win, Sabbath’s employers will feel the benefits too.’ He dipped a finger in the omelette mixture, snatched it away quickly and added the diced mushrooms. ‘And I don’t work for anyone.’

‘I think you probably work for Everyone.’ She smiled. ‘You work for Life.’

The Doctor shook his head, gave Anji the ghost of a smile. ‘No such things as jobs for life in the twenty-first century. You should know

that.'

Anji had a sinking feeling. 'So you're just going to wait around and let the universe unravel rather than be out-manoeuvred by Sabbath?'

'He's here, you know. I can feel him.' The Doctor stared gloomily out of the window, and opened it to clear some of the pan's thick smoke. 'Feel his footsteps drawing closer as sure as the beating of my hearts.'

'Hearts often get a beating when you're around. Doctor,' muttered Anji.

He flashed her a smile. 'And eggs. Do you have any *herbes de Provence*?'

'Please, Doctor.' This wasn't cute any more. She was suddenly very tired.

'For all we've been through. . . for all the people we know have died, for all those broken Earths we've seen, for everyone who's sacrificed themselves for us just so we might win this one. . . '

The Doctor flipped over the omelette and spun round to face her. 'I'm going to sort it,' he snapped. 'All right? Trust me. You don't need to remind *me* of all that's. . . '

Anji met his gaze fearlessly as he trailed off. The pan crackled and spat behind him.

'Maybe you do. Maybe you're right. You *are* right.' The Doctor challenged her with a small smile. 'But are you hungry?'

41

'Since you ask – ravenous.' She smiled as he flipped the omelette out on to a plate and placed it before her.

'Guy?' he called. 'Do you want any breakfast?' He picked up the pan and dumped it in a basin of cold water where it hissed and steamed in protest.

'You can have cornflakes or muesli.'

She raised an eyebrow, looking down at her steaming plateful.

The Doctor shrugged. 'Bored with doing that.'

Guy didn't answer. A crappy cellphone rendition of 'Delilah' piped up from the next room; his mobile had started ringing. It cut out and his low, muffled voice sounded through the closed door.

Anji turned back to her omelette. It tasted good. The Doctor watched her eat in silence.

A few minutes later, Guy poked his head round the door, fully dressed. 'That was Mike at work.'

The Doctor gave him a sharp look. 'Did you tell him where you are?'

'No. I rang off in the end.' He ran a hand absently through his wild hair.

'Jesus, this is all so screwed. . . '

'How did Mike sound?' asked Anji. 'Still homicidal?'

'He sounded OK. The hospital's called him and so have the police.' Guy looked anxious, moving his hands about like they were out of control. 'They all want to talk to me.'

The Doctor straightened up. 'Well, they can't.'

'Pete's been calling for me, apparently.'

'With a knife behind his back?' asked Anji.

'It's fine for you, isn't it?' he snapped. 'Not you they're after.' Wide-eyed and sulky, he suddenly looked about sixteen. 'I mean, I've done nothing wrong.'

They were trying to kill me, not the other way round! Why don't I just talk to the police and clear the whole thing up?'

'You'll tell them your gran, your girlfriend, your nephew and your work colleagues all want you dead,' surmised the Doctor. 'And yet they'll all have mysteriously forgotten everything. And the police will point out that your gran nearly drowned, your nephew is in the hospital with third-degree burns and your ladyfriend had her lights punched out – and you were standing next to each of them at the time.'

'Julie was down to *her*!' Guy pointed at Anji.

She nodded sheepishly. 'How come Julie hasn't phoned?'

‘She has. I’ve set the phone to route her calls to the answering service.’ He blew out a long breath. ‘I have no idea what to say to her.’

‘Say nothing,’ the Doctor told him sternly. ‘Not to anyone. This force that wants you dead, whatever it is, has used as its instruments of execution people close to you.’

42

‘What, and we always hurt the ones we love?’ Guy snorted.

‘We often piss them off,’ noted Anji.

‘Exactly,’ said the Doctor. ‘Little resentments. Maybe you argued with this girl, Julie, yesterday morning. . . ’

‘A tiny disagreement,’ protested Guy.

The Doctor nodded. ‘And maybe your nephew and your grandmother both wish you’d visit more often. . . ’

‘I’m busy! They understand that!’

Anji shrugged. ‘And Mike was annoyed that you’d gone through the things on his desk, remember?’

Guy looked troubled. ‘But what about the girl in the tea bar? I mean, OK, we snogged after a night on the sauce, like, nine months ago, but since then. . . ’

‘She probably pined for you,’ said Anji seriously. ‘Every single night, she’s played those brief, drunken, heavenly moments again and again.’

‘You reckon?’ Guy was incredulous.

‘No, not really.’ Anji stuffed the last of the omelette in her mouth. ‘She just wishes you were out of her life so she doesn’t have to cringe from the memory every time you slouch by.’

‘I don’t slouch!’

‘In any case,’ said the Doctor loudly ‘These negative feelings have been magnified by an external force to the point they motivate these people to murder.

So steer clear of them, Guy. I need to find out more about what’s going on around here. About why this is happening.’ He looked

worriedly at Anji. ‘This much I do know: Sabbath’s involved.’

‘And Timeless?’ she asked innocently.

‘A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.’ He picked up the old journal from the kitchen table and shoved it in his pocket. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, there’s something I must do.’

He barged past Guy and vanished from sight.

‘Check your change,’ Anji called after him. ‘You know what a miser the owner of that bookshop is. . . ’

A few seconds later, Anji heard the front door slam.

‘Is he always like this?’ asked Guy.

‘Not always,’ she replied, taking the dirty plate over to the sink. ‘Sometimes he doesn’t bother with the omelette.’

‘Well, you might be in his little gang, but I’m not. I don’t have to do what he says.’

She turned back to face him. ‘Look, Guy, I know the Doctor’s difficult to take at times, but bear with him. He’s not always big on easy answers, but 43

the ones he ends up with are generally better than any you might get on your own.’

‘How did he know. . . ?’ Guy broke off awkwardly. ‘That stuff about the piano.’

‘Spooky, isn’t it?’ She shuddered and smiled at the same time. ‘Like he’s just reaching in with his eyes and pocketing a piece of your past.’

‘So,’ said Guy, ‘are you doing him?’

Anji spluttered with laughter. ‘No!’

‘Is the other girl?’ His eyes widened, he clicked his fingers. ‘That guy! Fitz!

He’s his boyfriend, isn’t he!’

Anji stopped laughing. ‘What are you *talking* about?’

‘Well, the way you all hang around him, do just what he says.’ Guy smirked at her. ‘You’re either all shagging him or you’re part of some loony cult.’

‘We’re friends,’ said Anji fiercely. ‘Well. Most of us, anyway. We’ve been through a lot.’

‘Well, so have I,’ said Guy firmly. ‘And so has Pete.’ He broke off, looked down at the floor. ‘He’s only six, and scarred for life.’

Anji simmered down a little. ‘I know. It’s horrible. That’s why it’s so important that you let the Doctor –’

‘That lotion of his. It fixed up my face and shoulders pretty good.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘Reckon it could work wonders on Pete.’

‘You can’t just bring that stuff down to a hospital and –’

‘Why not, for God’s sake?’ Guy demanded. ‘If it worked on me it’ll work on him!’

Anji bit her lip. She totally understood where Guy was coming from, but she knew whatever the Doctor’s miracle cure was, the 21st century wasn’t ready for it yet. What if it led to another paradox, something that set off this whole nightmare again? ‘Guy, you heard the Doctor. It could be really dangerous to meet people you know –’

‘Look, Anji, you’re great, and your flat’s lovely, but I’m feeling like I need a little space right now.’ He turned his back, started to leave. ‘And I’m grateful for all you’ve done for me, but there’s stuff I have to sort out.’

‘Don’t be an idiot!’ she shouted. Then she froze.

There was something like mist clouding her vision.

‘Oh, God,’ said Guy. ‘My eyes. . . This is what it was like before, when. . .’

He stared at her, suddenly wide-eyed and fearful.

Then he bolted.

‘Guy, wait!’ she yelled. She made to chase after him, but not before she’d grabbed the knife from the worktop, without even thinking.

It was still warm from the Doctor’s touch.

Anji's vision cleared. She chucked the knife into the sink and ran from it like it might leap back out and stick in her ribs. She jumped on to her bed, trembling, looked at the clock until the passing minutes lost their meaning.

Half an hour had passed before she remembered why she'd picked up the knife in the first place. But her flat was long since empty. Guy had gone.

It didn't take a genius to know where he'd be heading for: the hospital. Anji dressed and was out of the house in a matter of minutes. The lift hauled her down twenty storeys in slow luxury. The moment the doors slid open she was tearing through the lobby, heading for her car in the parking bay outside.

She skidded to a halt, felt suddenly sick.

The little girl was standing in front of the MG, clutching her big book and dolly as before. Somewhere behind the car she could hear the dog snuffling about. The girl's wonky eyes were full of sadness; Anji knew instinctively that this little girl endured a lonely, unhappy life. Probably bullied for looking the way she did. For being different.

Anji took a step towards the girl. 'You were hanging round yesterday,' she said. 'Do you live round here?'

As the child shook her head, her blonde hair swept back and forth over her shoulders. 'My name's Chloe.'

'I'm -'

'You're Anji' She smiled, a big Snoopy-at-suppertime grin. 'Mum.'

Anji frowned, felt an inexplicable chill run through her again. 'Er - don't think so, sweetheart. Where is your mum, anyway? Shouldn't she be -'

'Jamais will keep trying to keep the mists away,' Chloe told her. 'And I will watch over you. I'll be there for you when you can't find your way.' She nodded, the smile shrinking a little. 'That's a promise.'

Anji stared at Chloe. There was something weird about this child, something almost unearthly she couldn't quite fathom. She wanted to ask what had happened to her eyes, but she didn't dare to.

Chloe rushed forwards suddenly, dropped her doll and her book and hugged Anji close. She squirmed in the child's grip, embarrassed, unsure what to do.

'You shouldn't even talk to strangers,' she warned, struggling to get free.

'Let alone hug them.'

'You're not going to *be* a stranger,' murmured Chloe, pressing her pale freckled face into the black folds of Anji's coat. She squeezed Anji so tight that she could hardly breathe.

'Guy needs you now. At the hospital. But we'll meet again soon.' With that, Chloe let go of Anji, snatched up her book and dolly and ran away. A flash of black bolted from behind her car as the dog dashed away too and disappeared round the corner.

45

'Wait,' called Anji, her head reeling with unanswered questions.

She reached the corner and saw Chloe and her dog had run into a tall, broad man, middle-aged, in a dark, well-cut suit. His grey hair was neatly combed and parted. He took the little girl roughly by the arm and stalked away down the street, the dog trailing along behind them.

46

Eight

The end of the quest

For once, the TARDIS didn't look at all out of place, even though people had to step round it to pass on the pavement. The Doctor smiled; he could almost hear the old girl's delighted thrumming through the police box façade.

Blending back into her old home, her proper place.

The Doctor strode off along Charing Cross Road to find the antiquarian bookshop. It was a delightful October afternoon, crisp and clear, filled with noise and crowds and bustle. After a time battling through the crowds, the Doctor nipped down a side street and emerged more or less opposite the bookshop. He grinned up at the peeling painted letters on the dark green hoarding.

The real thing. Magnificent.

He paused to apply his disguise. It wouldn't do to be recognised. Too much was at stake. He carefully stuck a Rhett Butler moustache on to his upper lip, pulled on an eyepatch, and produced a collapsible topper that almost slipped down over his ears. He checked his reflection in the window of a coffee shop, and turned several heads. Then, with a cheery wave, he set off to save a small but perfectly formed universe.

The door to the bookshop rattled and jingled as he opened it. An old woman, her hair grey and dusty as the several shelves she sat slumped under, gathered her coat about her neck as a draught whistled through.

The Doctor quickly closed the door and cleared his throat. 'Hello. I'd like to sell you a book.'

The old woman glanced up. 'Not buying then?' Her voice was like a crackly old record.

'I have a treat for you,' the Doctor told her, smiling faintly. He put the journal carefully, almost respectfully down on the table. The old woman peered at it suspiciously for a moment. 'What is this?'

'It's the expedition journal of the ill-fated Hanson-Galloway excursion to Siberia of 1894. *Extremely* ill-fated.' The Doctor patted the book proudly. 'A book that reeks of pioneering spirit.'

The old woman flicked open the battered notebook and sniffed noisily. 'I think you'll find it's mildew.'

'Mildew notwithstanding,' said the Doctor with a tight smile, 'I'm sure you'll 47

have sold it within. . . ' He pulled the fob watch from his waistcoat pocket and checked it. 'Oh, about three days.'

She gave him a dubious look and returned to counting her little pile of coins. 'One and six,' she announced after a while, pushing a shilling and a sixpence across the table. 'Take it or leave it.'

'I'll take it,' said the Doctor brightly. He scrutinised the coins, and beamed at the worn profile of dear old George VI. 'Thank you so much.' He skipped across to the door and flung it open so hard it nearly left its hinges. Then he pulled off his top hat and spread both

arms wide to the clear blue sky. ‘Hello, reality!’ he yelled. ‘You are cleared to land!’

‘Push off!’ shouted the old woman, frowning with a face that could scare pigs. ‘And shut that bloomin’ door!’

The Doctor did as he was bid, and strode off with a spring in his step. The deed was done, the sacrifices, quite frankly, worth it. And if he’d brought about what Sabbath had wanted all along, and if this newly resolved universe was now in danger once again, well then – he’d just have to rescue it again, wouldn’t he? Such battles characterised his life. The faces and the locations changed, but the situations boiled down to the same essence. Him. Turning the tables on some grim and witless evil. Again and always, *ad infinitum*.

He stopped, suddenly tired. He’d been walking for some time, but still hadn’t reached Charing Cross Road. Grey smog was rolling in, curious on such a dry, clear, sunlit day. He felt chilled, the slow rolling cold of anaesthetic swirling through his senses.

The people around him were going about their business as if nothing was wrong. But time was slowing. A tunnel was opening up before him. Vague, awful shapes flitted about within it.

The Doctor, like a rabbit breaking free of headlights’ glare, made a dash for it. He could still perceive London through the thick fog, ghostly bright and speckled like a silent movie projected in a smoky theatre.

His footfalls were soundless, the pavement as soft and sticky as bread and butter pudding. People mouthed reproaches as he pushed past, ploughing through the crowds. The cold wraiths swooped overhead, darted down with neat skill and snapped at his coat tails.

Then the TARDIS was in front of him and he was pushing inside it.

The fog was gone. The vast interior of his ship was silent save for the comforting hum of its improbable systems. The Doctor fell to his knees and crouched there, shivering for many minutes.

All was not well, then.

At length, he rose timidly and pressed the buttons that would return him to Anji’s present. The TARDIS took him there quickly – too quickly. A wisp of 48

steam rose from the console. The Doctor eyed it suspiciously as it coiled in the air, lingering like an old ache.

The doors opened by themselves.

‘How could I resist such a charming invitation?’ muttered the Doctor, as he left to face whatever was waiting outside.

It was the sea, dim and rolling stormily under a sky as hard and black as rock. The stars were like mica dust upon it. The waves thundered in, restless and lonely. The Doctor took a step forwards on this strange shore. Pebbles crunched wetly under his shoe.

Then the fog was back, first in cotton candy wisps then in great billowing sheets, tough and sticky as cobwebs, engulfing him. He pitched forwards, felt the cold sea sting his skin, soak his sleeve, felt his thoughts freeze over.

49

Nine

Diamond cut diamond

‘How’re we going to kill him, then?’

Susan looked up at her husband from where she lay sprawled on the couch and smiled wryly. ‘That’s the fun part, isn’t it? We can be creative.’

‘At least he’s ugly,’ said Ralf. He’d spread the pictures of their intended victim all over the coffee table. ‘We’ll be doing him a favour, knocking him off.’

‘And satisfying a *deeply* psychotic need in ourselves,’ added Susan extravagantly. She sighed, as if the effort had exhausted her, and returned to patching up her crimson nails. ‘The streets will be safer places while we have homes like his to kill in.’

Ralf gave her a look that carried a trace of disapproval, before crossing to the living room window. He stared out over the little rectangle of Battersea it afforded him. Had it only been a day since they’d bought themselves this bizarre once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

‘Be dark soon,’ he observed, with a shiver.

‘We should do it at night.’ She shrugged. ‘Or is that too clichéd? Deeds

of darkness, and all that.'

He drew the curtains, flicked on the kettle. 'Well, it is murder.'

'Daylight robbery, more like. £75,000 in diamonds for the pleasure?' She snorted, smoothed the nail varnish over her little toenail. 'Make us a coffee while you're there.'

'We're out.'

'Oh well. We can nick some from Signor Nencini's pad. Bound to be good stuff there – Italians understand coffee.' She closed her eyes and wriggled her toes with their perfect crimson nails. 'Mmmm.'

Ralf dropped his tea bag in the mug. 'It is a bit steep, isn't it? Having to fork out all those diamonds. . . When we could go out and slit some random bugger's throat for free.'

'True. But it would be over in a flash, and you'd be starring in the *Evening Standard* and on *Crimewatch* before you'd washed your sticky red hands.' Susan smiled. 'I suppose if Timeless sets it all up so it's consequence free, and chooses victims that no one will miss. . . '

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Ralf gave her a funny look as he poured in the boiling water. '"They've got to die anyway", that creep Basalt said. What do you think he meant by that, Trix?'

She leaped up from the shapeless sofa, suddenly furious. 'Susan!' she bellowed. He jumped, splashed water, scalded his wrist. 'Who the hell is Trix?'

'Oh, shut up. I don't feel like being Ralf for a while, all right? I want to be Fitz for a bit.' He sucked at his wrist. 'And that makes you Trix, and us not married. Yippee.'

'Amateur,' Trix muttered under her breath.

'Freak!' he retorted. 'You're starting to scare me, the way you're getting into all this.'

'I'm getting into *character*, you sap.'

'Jesus.' Fitz shook his head. 'Why the Doctor volunteered us for this on the word of some little girl. . . '

‘Wishing you’d been with Anji all this time, are you?’

Fitz said nothing.

‘Yes, well, the Doctor couldn’t really ask her, could he?’ Trix scrutinised her nails. ‘He needed someone who could pull this act off.’

‘And you never stop, do you? Acting, I mean.’

She shrugged.

The annoying thing was that Trix really *was* good. She could slip on a whole new personality in the time it took Fitz to put on one sock. She really seemed to become a different person entirely, which was especially annoying if you started to like that person, because you knew that the second her usefulness had expired she’d be gone, without regret. Replaced by. . . the real her? Who the hell was this woman anyway?

When the Doctor had announced the pair of them were down for this ‘deep cover’ mission, the day after Fitz’s brief stint as a lift engineer, sharing a flat with Trix for weeks at a time hadn’t seemed so bad. He figured maybe they’d bond, grow closer, that he’d work her out a little better – or, at the very least, catch a glimpse of her tits. Instead it was just weird. He’d worked out early on that Trix wasn’t only playing the part of Susan Canonsire, trying to get inside this Timeless organisation the Doctor had a thing about. She was playing another part too: that highly demanding role of Woman in Enforced Intimacy with Fitz.

She’d been very good at it too as the weeks wore on – listening to his stories, laughing at his jokes, chatting about this and that. But she wasn’t quite so hot as she thought she was. A couple of weeks in he’d noticed her eyes glazing over, or a subtle yawn, or some forced enthusiasm. They weren’t two friends getting through something; it was like the Doctor had set him up with an escort, someone paid to respond to him in as professional a way as possible.

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What really annoyed him was the fact he’d noticed any of this at all; she didn’t rate him highly enough to keep the truth from him.

Six weeks it had been. They had to seem a credible couple, the Doctor said.

They had to be seen to be around. New to the area – and looking for very particular thrills. He'd kitted them out with a few useful props, sorted them out some ID – and prepared to take them back a month and a half into the past. 'By the time you've made first contact and got something positive to go on,' he'd predicted, 'you'll have caught up with Anji and me in *this* time. We can help you.'

Fitz turned to Trix. 'So are we an old married couple? Looking for a way to spice up the tedium of our lives together?'

'Look at the way you're fiddling with that wedding ring,' Trix pointed out.

'You're not used to it, you can't leave it alone. You don't even know you're doing it. We'd better be newly weds.'

'Agreed,' said the Doctor. 'But I'd rather you'd been together as a couple for years. Stability, you see.'

'Six years.' She nodded. 'We were in such a rut, we either broke up, or we got married. We were stupid and opted for the latter.'

It would be dangerous, the Doctor had told them. Timeless wasn't just about murder – its real business was something far more sinister. The people who were a part of it were no fools. Fitz and Trix needed a pukka past, should anyone want to check them out. And once contact had been made, their flat would almost certainly be rifled through for any evidence of a set up.

Fitz suggested a photo album, full of pix showing the two of them together in different times and places.

'We met in the crowds around Princess Di's funeral,' Trix suggested. 'Both cursing them as a bloody nuisance.'

The Doctor gave her a look of grim approval, and set the controls. 'A suitably morbid beginning.'

They'd posed among the mourners on the Mall, both wearing brightly coloured suits. Fitz felt embarrassed but Trix seemed to enjoy the looks of disapproval, the mumbled comments aimed in their direction.

'Why would we even do this?' complained Fitz.

'It's obvious.' Trix pulled a still cheesier grin for the Doctor's instamatic.

‘You were trying to use up a film to get it developed that day. We met when you asked me to pose for your last pictures, since I was the only splash of colour in this whole miserable morass of black.’ She looked at him pointedly.

‘As come-ons go, I thought it was poor, Ralf. But you were quite cute so I went along with it.’

Fitz stared at her, gobsmacked.

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‘Come on, Fitz,’ the Doctor coached him, snapping away. ‘You’ve got a pretty girl posing for pictures with you! You’re well on your way!’

‘But where to?’ he muttered, smiling resignedly.

The Doctor took them in the TARDIS all around the world, posing together, piecing together the dates and details of their mythical relationship. As a venture capitalist, Ralf Canonshire had fingers in many pies. He particularly enjoyed investing in films; oh yes, he could spot the winners. His glamorous

– but already ever so slightly bored – wife Susan simply trailed round after him soaking up the sun and the good life. They had put down the flimsiest of roots – a luxury villa outside Milan (for Susan spoke more than a smattering of Italian), a chateau in Nantes (for Ralf could attempt a pretty good French accent). They had more money than sense, and a taste for illegal thrills you couldn’t buy on the open market

Fab!

A back copy of Anji’s local paper had yielded a great flat ready to rent (though Fitz, North London born and bred, found it hard to feel comfortable south of the river). The Doctor was footing the staggering bill, and who was Fitz to argue? This, he told himself, posing in dark glasses and his beret in the mirror in his swanky new pad, was going to be fun.

He should’ve known better, of course.

Their real mission, apart from trying not to murder each other in the meantime, was to make contact with the mysterious jet-setting Daniel Basalt. He travelled a lot, but was based in South London. The girl had apparently given the Doctor the full SP on this villain, right down to

details of the clubs he frequented and the faces he mixed with. Fitz was to mix with them too.

That was the fun part, establishing himself as a man-about-several-towns, an international playboy with a calculatedly amoral streak. He'd almost been disappointed when finally, during a particularly ribald night down the Groucho, his ruse resulted in talk of this Basalt fella. At a private party in Chelsea later that night he was introduced to a half-Chinese guy everyone called Chongy.

Chongy secured access for Basalt's special guests, and had suggested Ralf should get in touch next time he was in town, if he wanted some real fun.

'Forget Chongy,' Trix had told him at the start of week four. 'I'll make contact with Basalt directly, alone – since Dear Daniel has an eye for the ladies.'

'You'll poke it out, in that outfit,' Fitz said, trying not to stare at just how low a neckline could plunge.

'Dress nice, and nasty things will happen. As mum used to say.'

Fitz gave her a cynical look.

Trix shrugged, unembarrassed. 'Distraction tactics. Your eyes are glued to my chest, right?'

'Wrong!' lied Fitz.

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'Basalt's a bloke. This dress might just dissuade him from looking into my eyes for very long.' She blinked. 'If anything's going to give you away, it's the eyes.'

'I thought you were a pro. Worried?'

'The Doctor said we ought to be,' Trix replied coolly. 'First rule of a con: minimise your risks.'

Trix had already befriended one of Basalt's women, Bethany, who had told her when Basalt was due to visit. Her plan was to call round at Bethany's before he arrived, and linger long enough to meet him on her way out. A chance encounter; and if he liked what he saw, she imagined he wouldn't dream of her leaving. Bethany would be mad as

hell, but Trix's objective would be achieved.

It worked like a charm, and gave her the opportunity in front of Basalt to make her feelings clear: that she didn't have any. All that could hope to stir her ennui was that ever-since-she-was-a-schoolgirl desire to attain the ultimate high. . . whatever the cost. Cheesy stuff sure, but Basalt seemed receptive to it. That and the dress, of course.

He told Trix she'd be surprised by how many people felt just the same as she did. Perhaps she should talk to some and hear how he'd helped them. . .

One thing had led to another, and now here they were. Clients of Timeless, and expected to kill.

The row had blown over by bedtime; neither of them had the energy or the inclination. The end was in sight now; the present day was approaching – the day they'd left to come here, six weeks into history. They'd touch base with the Doctor soon.

It was Fitz's turn for the couch and sleeping bag this week. As he snuggled down, Trix came out of the bedroom in a silk dressing gown.

'What do you think we should do now?' she asked him.

Fitz looked at her sceptically. Asking his opinion now? What tactics were these? 'I think we should learn a bit more about Signor Nencini. And what Basalt gets up to when he's not scooching about clubs and luring beautiful women into webs of crime, vice and general villainy.' He sighed. 'Lucky bugger.'

'I agree,' Trix said. 'With the first bit. I'm going to spy on Nencini in Streatham, see if I can dig up any dirt on him, anything that might've led to his status as one of Basalt's targets.'

'Which leaves me to follow Basalt,' mused Fitz. 'A touch of the old secret agent stuff. OK.'

'It's a deal, then,' she said. 'N'night, Ralf baby.'

Fitz smiled ruefully. 'So long, Susan.'

'Is it? Don't tease me.' She blew him a kiss and vanished back into the bedroom.

Part of him knew damn well she was only pretending to flirt with him to make him feel better. But Fitz chose not to listen to that part for once, and soon fell into a happy sleep.

Next morning, Fitz picked up Basalt's trail outside Jacqui's place – the stinky git's car, a dark blue Porsche, was parked outside. Fitz sat keeping watch till he was so bored he could eat the steering wheel just for something to do.

Finally Basalt opened Jacqui's front door briskly about 3 p.m. and left without a backward glance. Jacqui, on the other hand, dressed in a white towelling dressing gown, stared after him with doglike devotion till he'd rounded the corner out of sight.

Soon Basalt was tearing off down Holland Park Avenue towards Shepherds Bush, while Fitz followed on discreetly in a second-hand Nova. The heavy traffic was a great leveller of speed, and he had no difficulty tailing Basalt as he left London and headed out on to the M3.

After an hour and a half Fitz reckoned he was heading for Southampton, or Poole. It was actually Bournemouth.

Bournemouth left Fitz unimpressed. It was full of hotels that looked too big and people who looked too old. But as he negotiated the town's outskirts he supposed the place must have something to offer a swinger like Basalt.

Apparently it did. A woman in a wheelchair.

She looked to be in her fifties, with the most beautiful sad blue eyes. She was clipping the roses in her garden when Basalt walked up the driveway.

He'd parked three streets away; Fitz observed with sinking heart that the needlessly long walk wasn't due to problems parking.

Fitz watched as Basalt shook her hand and waved about a leather briefcase.

A few minutes later she was leading the way to her pebble-dashed bungalow.

Basalt took a casual look round, and Fitz shrank further back into the bushes of the B&B opposite, out of sight. Danger Man had nothing on him.

An hour and a half later, when Basalt still hadn't come back out. Fitz feared the worst. But he could hardly knock on the door and check everything was all right, could he? And now a man kept glaring out at him from the B&B's window.

He trudged back to his car, feeling uneasy. From there, he could keep an eye on Basalt's motor, maybe even give it a quick once over. And when Basalt came back, he could pop back and check up on the old dear and her amazing eyes.

By nine o'clock Fitz was bored and miserable. He had a good mind to give up on the whole idea; the lady in the chair was probably another of Basalt's 56

birds. Her wheels could be a kick if you were that way inclined. He was stupid to be sitting here worrying.

Even so, he decided he'd have one more look at the woman's house before calling it a wasted night.

A chill had crept into the evening, and the dusky streets were pretty much deserted. Fitz sneaked up the driveway and paused outside the front door.

The curtains were drawn in the living room, but the lights were on, and so was a blaring TV. Maybe she was deaf as well as crippled. They certainly weren't having a quiet night in at that volume, but still. . . probably harmless.

His stomach churned as he crept along the side of the house, scaled a gate, and hotfooted it into her well-kept little garden.

The TV was still louder back here. A sit-com by the sound of things. At least he didn't have to worry about any noise he might make.

Fitz leaped heroically for the cover of an austere-looking conifer. Heart thumping, he risked a peep round it.

Blue blinds hung down over one window. Suddenly they snapped up, and there was the woman.

She was hunched over the worktop, her face bruised and bloody, banging on the window and clearly screaming. But the only noise Fitz could hear was from the TV.

Basalt smacked the woman's head into the window and cracked open

both.

Then he heaved her prone body out of sight and yanked the blinds back down.

While canned laughter roared in the background, Basalt was killing her.

And the man was smiling; how he was smiling.

57

Ten

Second chances

Celia could tell them a mile off, or from halfway down the avenue at least.

Hawkers, peddling shoddy goods or religion no doubt: a big, lumbering man in a bad suit and a poor little girl he'd dragged along with him for the sympathy vote on this cold winter afternoon.

She resolved not to answer the door, but kept twitching her net curtains periodically to check on the duo's progress as they called dolefully along the shiny front doors of the tree-lined street.

Except that they weren't knocking on anyone's doors. They were just peering at the numbers on each, and moving on.

Oddly troubled, Celia came away from the window and busied herself with the usual nothings about the house. Charles wouldn't be home for another three hours. As always in the long daytimes, she missed him.

The trill of the doorbell made her jump half out of her skin. She ignored it, peeved they should pick on her, and held herself very still and quiet while she waited to see if they'd try again.

They did. She was expecting the ring this time but still she jumped just the same.

By the third ring, in a sudden rush of irritation, she bustled over to the door and opened it.

'I don't want anything, thank you,' she said primly. 'Please go away.'

‘You have lovely eyes,’ said the little girl, who did not. Hers were asymmet-ri-cal, one a good inch higher than the other, and a sort of milky blue, whereas Celia’s were a sparkling indigo.

‘I beg your pardon?’ she said frostily.

‘They are,’ agreed the man. ‘Beautiful eyes.’ He smiled happily at her, no trace of mischief or malice about him. If anything he seemed a bit simple.

Everything about him – eyes, nose, lips, arms – seemed slightly oversized.

The girl on the other hand looked much sharper, and soon proved it.

‘They’re your best feature. I’ll bet people tell you that all the time.’

Celia blinked. They *had* used to tell her that.

‘And I’m sure,’ said the child, lowering her voice and adopting a confidential tone, ‘that they helped to reel in Charles all those years ago, didn’t they?’

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Celia turned, almost speechless, to the big man. ‘You have an impudent daughter,’ she spluttered at last.

He shrugged. ‘She is not my daughter.’

Then, with a prickle along her spine, Celia realised she’d seen the child before. ‘You were following me around the supermarket yesterday. I told you to clear off.’

‘You did,’ agreed the girl evenly. She had a rucksack on her back. A doll’s arm stuck out from beneath the canvas flap. ‘My name’s Chloe.’

‘And I am Erasmus,’ said the man.

‘What is it you want?’ Celia asked, more suspicious now than ever. ‘How dare you try to poke your silly noses into –’

‘Chloe’s found out something about you.’ Erasmus looked sad now, genuinely sorry. ‘It’s not good news, I’m afraid.’

‘Something bad’s going to happen to you,’ said Chloe. Her eyes seemed frozen in her freckled face, fixing Celia to the spot. ‘Something

that'll make you wish you were dead.'

'Goodness me.' Celia took a step back. 'I think I've heard enough of this nonsense.'

'Wait,' commanded the big man. 'When it happens to you –'

'Nothing's going to happen to me. Stop this.'

'When it happens, call us on this number.' He handed her a dog-eared slip of paper. In biro was written the word TIMELESS, and beneath it was a phone number with too many digits.

'We'll help you, then,' said Chloe. 'Me and Erasmus can give you a better life than you could ever dream possible.'

Celia ripped up the card furiously and threw it over them like tatty confetti.

'I've heard quite enough. Now kindly leave me alone, for goodness' sake!'

She slammed the door in their faces.

The letterbox opened and another card was pushed through it.

'You will want to speak to us when it happens,' the man called. 'I promise you!'

'We can take you back to Charles!' added Chloe. 'But you'd better save your pennies now. It won't be cheap, I'm afraid.'

'Leave me alone!' she shrieked, and the two of them walked away at last.

Celia picked up the card, crumpled it into a tiny ball, and threw it in the grate.

Angry and flustered, she flicked on the television for distraction. There was that ghastly, gloating Heseltine, waving smugly at the dolts who had voted him in for his third term at Number Ten. On the other side, there was sport as usual. Two channels, and nothing worth watching on either. . .

She turned on the radio, and was soon lost in a wash of soothing symphonies. Charles came home promptly at seven, and she complained to him 60

bitterly about the unscheduled disturbance to her day.

Within a week, she'd put the incident entirely from her mind.

It was to be exactly eleven months before she thought of Chloe and her guardian again.

They were all she could think of in the aftermath of the crash, with Charles crushed to pulp and her own lower spine pulverised. While the doctors rattled on about experimental therapies and positive thinking and what her insurance premiums didn't cover. Celia dwelled on Chloe and her strange eyes, the simple smile on Erasmus's face as he looked at her, and the tiny ball of business card that had burnt in moments as she'd lit the fire that night.

Once she was allowed home, she stared all day at the empty grate as if the card might simply appear good as new, as presumptuous as the pair themselves.

Weeks passed in a fury of pain and tears and screaming, *I cannot adjust, I cannot learn, I cannot go on this way.* Then, Celia had visitors.

They let themselves in.

The little girl pushed a card in Celia's hand, crossed her arms and tutted. 'I knew you'd lose the other one,' she explained patiently.

A large, dark doglike animal nosed its way about the room before sitting beside Chloe. She petted it. The creature looked up at the little girl, mournful and devoted. Then at Celia, expectantly. Like it wanted to be taken for a walk.

'Will you listen to us now?' said the big man softly. 'Listen to how we can make things better.'

61

Eleven

No-chance meetings

Guy forced himself to stop glancing back over his shoulder. He was acting like some cheap gangster, not a relatively well-paid minor civil servant.

The hospital smelled of disinfectant, luncheon meat and something inde-finable; fear, perhaps. At least his wasn't the only hounded face round here.

Crowds of pale-faced people shuffled back and forth with lost expressions, following coloured lines or watching out for helpful signs, and once Guy's dark glasses were stowed in his top pocket he blended in just fine.

He reached his nephew's ward without hassle. He recognised his sister's coat hung over the back of an empty chair before he realised the bed beside it was Pete's. His stomach twisted to see the boy lying there, dark and red like a mess spilled over the white sheets. Pete's flaky, swollen face was sticky with antiseptic gel. He was sleeping.

Guy asked a nurse at ward reception. 'Pete's visitor, Liz Webber, is she about?'

The skinny nurse gave him a tired smile. 'She went to get some food, I think. Probably in the canteen, doesn't like leaving him for long.'

‘I’ll just wait for her then.’

‘Are you a relative?’

‘Oh, God, no,’ said Guy hurriedly. ‘No, not me. I’m. . . I’m just a friend of Liz’s.’

The nurse looked at him strangely. ‘OK,’ she said in a manner that suggested it wasn’t.

Guy turned quickly before she could see him blush, and crossed to the boy’s bed. ‘Pete,’ he breathed, wanting to hold his hand but scared of hurting him.

‘Pete, it’s me. Uncle Guy.’

Pete didn’t react. Probably tranquillised.

Carefully, Guy pulled from his jacket pocket the bottle of magic lotion, poured some into his hand and gently massaged it into Pete’s raw fingers. The boy stirred a little, but didn’t cry or anything. Emboldened, Guy tried rubbing some of the odourless liquid swiftly into the lad’s sticky red cheeks, and over his burnt patchy scalp. Guy’s own burns had been minor in comparison, but surely this stuff had to do some good.

63

‘What are you doing to him?’ asked a podgy black girl in the bed next door.

‘It’s just moisturiser,’ he said, forcing a smile as he started rubbing it into Pete’s sore shoulders.

‘The nurse won’t like you doing that.’

He gave her a conspiratorial wink. ‘Then let’s not tell her, eh?’

‘Are you a pervert?’ the girl asked him with interest.

He glanced back to the nurse at reception. She was looking at him in alarm.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’

He stood up guiltily. ‘Uh. . . Nothing. Just trying to help.’

‘He’s a pervert!’ called the little girl helpfully.

Guy swore. The nurse was already reaching for the phone. ‘I’ll be back, mate,’ he whispered to Pete. Then he turned and walked briskly from the ward. When the nurse called after him, he started to run before she had security on to him.

The way out proved almost impossible to find. In the end he chanced upon the back exit, and tried to look as innocent as possible as he stepped out into the street.

Where his boss was waiting.

‘Mike!’ Guy said, drawing out the word like it was full of i’s as he fought to find something to say beyond ‘*What the hell are you doing here, you bearded git?*’

‘Thought I’d find you here,’ said Mike, easing himself up from the bench outside. ‘Not a good day for you, this, is it? No, can’t be.’

‘You could say that.’ Guy looked around, half expecting to find a dozen coppers creeping up on him. They might be hidden from view by Mike’s expansive gut. ‘On your lunch break?’

‘Yeah. Early one. But I needed the air. Pure oxygen, more like, actually –

you know that temp’s let me down. Never showed up this morning, and the company don’t even have her details on file!’

Moving swiftly on, thought Guy. ‘Hey, thanks for being cool about me needing the day off.’

He shrugged. ‘I might be your boss, but I’m your mate first and foremost, aren’t I?’

‘Are you?’ Guy frowned, deciding to test the Doctor’s theory. ‘You tried to throttle me yesterday.’

‘Eh?’

‘Outside the lifts. You almost throttled me.’

‘Throttled you?’ Mike’s face was frozen somewhere between laugh and grimace, like he was waiting for a punchline to put him out of his misery. ‘Er, did a few of your brain cells go up in smoke too last night?’ He caught himself.

‘Sorry, that was a bit sick. Still,’ he laughed cheerily, ‘there’s a hospital here, shall I check myself in? Nurse! I’m sick! Heh, heh.’

‘Maybe you should get them to look at your bruised foot?’

Mike frowned. ‘The old toes *are* a bit sore as it happens, but how did you. . . ?’

Guy gave up. ‘You don’t remember.’

Mike glanced about almost as shiftily as Guy himself. ‘Look, mate. I know this isn’t an easy time and all that, but. . . did you go through *all* the files on my desk when I was away?’

Guy frowned. ‘I was only trying to be efficient, Mike. The subcommittee were after those stats for the south-east, and I –’

‘Yeah, well, spare me the whys and the wherefores, Guy.’ He sank his hands in his trouser pockets. ‘Just tell me what you went through.’

‘Nothing confidential!’ Guy protested. ‘Just the landing stats, the quota monitoring. . . ’ He trailed off. ‘Hang on. You came all this way, on the off-chance I might be about, to ask me about the stuff on your desk?’

Mike looked suddenly defensive. ‘You crossed a line, mate.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Guy’s eyes were watering. He rubbed them but couldn’t clear his vision. ‘Well, when I’m back at work, you can shine a desk lamp in my face and I’ll see if I can remember if it was the market analysis on cod or haddock that I pulled out first, satisfied?’

Mike scowled. ‘Remember who you’re talking to, son!’

Rain had started falling in a fine mist. ‘Why? You can’t even remember trying to kill me!’

Mist? Bugger.

By the glazed look on Mike’s face as he lunged for Guy’s throat, he wouldn’t remember attempt number two, either.

Before Guy could even react something slim and dark cannoned into Mike and sent him staggering back into a wall.

‘Didn’t I tell you it wasn’t safe to go out?’ panted Anji.

‘Ten points for rescue in the nick of time,’ grinned Guy. ‘Minus one for smugness.’

Mike snarled and lumbered forwards again, reaching out for Guy.

‘Oh, God!’ panicked Anji, and she kicked him in the crotch. He went down heavily.

‘He’ll have a job forgetting about that,’ observed Guy, glancing round nervously as a concerned crowd started to gather.

‘Honestly, I’m not normally the action heroine type,’ Anji told him, looking quite crestfallen as Mike lay groaning at her feet. ‘I feel quite bad about this.’

‘Call the police!’ twittered a passer-by. ‘Quick!’

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‘It’s all right,’ Anji said, holding up her hands. ‘We’re only just outside a hospital, why don’t I help him up and. . .’ The sound of sirens started up.

‘God, that was quick!’

‘Probably just ambulances!’ Guy said hopefully.

‘Let’s not stick around to find out.’ She grabbed Guy by the wrist and hauled him after her. Together, they ran full tilt through a bundle of back streets, putting as much distance between themselves and the hospital as possible.

Mike got up, struggled to his feet, feeling nauseous and very tender in the trouser department. Everything was hazy. He’d done as he was told, he’d come here to speak to Guy, and then. . .

‘I saw it all!’ a skinny young woman was screeching to some hospital official.

‘He tried to attack this man, and this girl comes along, and they’re kicking and screaming and off they both run. . .’

The official clearly had no idea what had happened here. Good, thought Mike, I’m not the only one. While the hysterical woman kept the official busy, Mike pushed past the ragged crowd of onlookers and

hurried painfully down the street, not daring to look back in case someone asked him to give a statement or something. What the hell had collided with his twig and berries?

A light aircraft by the feel of things. . .

Guts griping, he zigzagged through side streets, with no clue where he was going. Then a broad, tall figure in a dark suit came round the corner and stopped him dead.

‘You seem in a hurry, Mike,’ came the low American voice.

Mike swallowed hard. ‘Mr Basalt? Daniel!’

Basalt walked down the alley towards him. ‘You quizzed your junior, right?’

Does he know anything?’

‘I . . . ’ Mike caught a whiff of something foul; 50–50 if it was the dustbins beside him or just standing downwind of Basalt. ‘Yeah, I spoke to him. He doesn’t know a thing.’

‘You sure?’

‘Sure.’

‘You positive?’

‘I always look on the bright side, if that’s what you –’

Basalt grabbed hold of Mike by his lapels and leaned in to look him close in the eye.

‘Of course, if you’d been careful in the first place and kept stuff under lock and key. . . ’

Mike could feel sweat trickle down the back of his neck. ‘I was panicking over nothing. It’s cool. No sweat.’ He took a deep breath of B.O. and wished 66

he hadn’t. His stomach was churning. ‘That is to say. . . Oh, I should never have even bothered you.’

‘No, you shouldn’t have.’ Basalt’s voice was quiet and menacing. ‘We have a good thing going here, you and me. But if one of us screws up, it all gets shot to hell. See?’

‘Sure.’

‘And I am not about to screw up. I got something good coming to me when this is all through.’ He tightened his grip on Mike’s lapels, caught and twisted the skin beneath. ‘But how about you, Mike? You going to screw up?’

‘No,’ Mike gasped. He opened his mouth, willing himself to say the words he’d rehearsed so carefully for so many months now.

‘And you wouldn’t be thinking of bailing on me. . .

would you?’ Basalt

smiled. ‘That wouldn’t be friendly. Not when we’ve got something so good going for us here. . . ’

Mike cleared his throat. ‘Well, it’s funny you should mention –’

‘Would you?’ Basalt shoved him back against the slimy wall of the narrow alley.

He winced. ‘No! No, I wouldn’t! Please, Mr Basalt. . . someone’s already attacked me today.’

‘So I saw. That dark-skinned girl. . . still chasing round after him.’ Basalt smiled again. ‘When you told me he’d gone through your desk I had him tailed. She followed our little Guy-Spy out of your offices and waited for him at his place.’

Mike frowned. ‘The temp?’ He gingerly cupped his tender crotch, disturbed that there seemed to be a connection there. A definite connection.

Basalt shrugged. ‘He gets there, something weird goes down, they split, and the girl puts him up for the night. Now, that’s not normal behaviour for our man, right? And I bet it’s not normal for her, neither.’ He paused, then turned to look down at something behind him. ‘She was hanging round outside her place when I came looking this morning,’ Basalt went on. ‘Looking for him, I guess. . . but finding you.’

‘We told Erasmus we were going out,’ a girl’s voice whined. ‘We were allowed.’ She stepped out from his shadow and into Mike’s sight. She was blonde, could only be about eight or so. And her eyes. . .

Jesus.

‘Look, Mr Basalt,’ he said, taking a wobbly stab at his most authoritative Fisheries Officer voice, ‘why don’t I just. . .’

‘Yeah, why don’t you.’ Basalt let go of Mike and stepped disdainfully away.

‘Get back to work. There’s stuff you need to see to.’

‘Or not see to, eh?’ He chanced a grin. Saw Basalt wasn’t laughing, and cleared off sharpish.

67

* * *

Chloe looks up at her ‘Uncle’ Daniel. She hates him. She hates all the things that are necessary and cruel.

‘What were you doing outside the dark girl’s place?’ he asks her.

She squeezes her dolly more tightly. ‘Playing.’

‘Who is she?’

‘I don’t know.’

Jamais sidles out from the shadows of the deserted alley and snuffles over to sit beside her. Basalt spares him a brief glance before turning his cold attention back to Chloe.

‘So you didn’t speak to her.’

‘No.’ Chloe links her hands behind her back, puts on her best dippy little girl smile. ‘I have this book, you see, and sometimes the stuff I read in it comes true –’

‘Spare me the fairy tales, freak-girl.’ Basalt starts to turn away, but Jamais growls threateningly, and he freezes. Just for a moment, his composure is broken; Chloe lives for moments like these.

‘Call off your dog.’

‘He’s not a dog.’ She smiles sweetly. ‘A dog would only bite you.’

Basalt looks first at her, then at Jamais. Then he smiles, thinly. ‘So it

was just a coincidence, right? OK, I'll buy that. For now.' He clicks his fingers as he turns to go. 'Come on. I'm through talking to kids. I need to talk with Erasmus.'

Chloe shrugs at Jamais and tucks her dolly under one arm. Jamais gives the doll a dirty look. As Chloe wriggles her arms through the straps on her rucksack, she feels her heavy book dig a corner into her back.

'There's no such thing as coincidence,' she tells her dolly quietly in case she's been taken in by the exchange. 'And no such thing as chance meetings.'

Chloe follows on after Basalt, Jamais close beside her.

68

Twelve

Drowning, murder and breakfast

The Doctor was drowning.

A foul, salty torrent of sea water was flooding down his throat, filling his lungs till they felt packed with ice. But he barely noticed. The mist that surrounded him was so thick and impenetrable, his senses were too busy trying to find a way through. It was like voices were calling out, trying to reach him.

But were they taunting him or trying to teach?

He was sinking, pulled out with the black tide. Another voice nagged at him. It was Chloe's.

Chloe had found him in the TARDIS at the point of death, and saved him.

Some people you could save, and some had to die. He'd asked why, and she'd shown him pictures in a book as if that explained everything. There was Sabbath and himself, and a woman who looked sad, and what would prove to be a good likeness of Guy. What was it that primitives believed? That cameras could capture your soul?

The book said that Guy had become the most special man in the universe, but the reason why was over the page and Chloe wouldn't let him turn it. The Doctor wanted to read what the book said about

him but Chloe had snatched it away. Perhaps it was as well. You should never believe your own reviews –

unless they were good, of course.

Was it written in that ancient print that he would die here, his punishment for setting this universe on a stable course once more? Was that what the child had hidden from him?

The voices were growing louder. His body felt heavy and desensitised but he could somehow hear through the star-speckled blackness that –

‘Breathe, god damn it!’

The Doctor sat up abruptly and retched up what seemed like a gallon of saltwater. He coughed and choked, spitting out the rank stuff.

Strong hands massaged his back. ‘Easy. I gotcha. It’s OK.’ It was a woman who held him, American by the sound of it. A thermos cup of warm coffee was pressed into his shaking hands. He gulped it back in one hit and tilted his head to see his rescuer in the moonlight.

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She was a handsome woman who looked to be in her late thirties. She was wearing a wetsuit, and a scuba mask hung round her neck. Her hair was long and blonde and curled in tight ringlets. Her eyes were a little too far apart, and pale like her skin.

‘You’re safe now,’ she told him.

The Doctor gave a long, plaintive sigh, and his head fell forwards on to his chest.

‘Is that not good news?’ The woman frowned at him. ‘What was that sigh for?’

“For the cold strange eyes of a little mermaiden, and the gleam of her golden hair”,’ he replied vaguely, looking round for any sign of Chloe nearby.

‘A quote?’

‘Matthew Arnold. Champed and chafed and tossed in the spray, I felt quite the forsaken merman.’

She seemed unimpressed as she handed him a towel. ‘Did Matthew

Arnold give you the clothes as well as the lines?’ She indicated his cravat and waistcoat.

‘No, these are my very own.’

‘Gotcha.’ She looked at him dubiously. ‘Well, do you know any nice poems that say “Thank you for rescuing me”? Or were you actually trying to kill yourself?’

‘No!’ The Doctor stared at her, horrified. ‘I’m very grateful to you, Miss. . . ?’

‘I’m Stacy. Stacy Phillips.’

‘Do I know you, Stacy? I’m sure I recognise you.’

‘Don’t think so.’

‘Well, no matter. I’m the Doctor, and I adore continental roasted.’ Taking the hint with a bemused look, she poured him another cup. Again, he gulped it straight down, then started towelling his hair. The night wasn’t so cold.

He stripped off his soaking jacket and slung it on to the pebbled shore, then began on his shirt. ‘How did you find me? I mean, with all that mist. . . ’

‘Mist?’ she said warily. ‘There’s no mist tonight.’

‘You didn’t see it then,’ he muttered to himself. ‘The manifestation was meant only for me. . . ’

She rose, a tall shadow; the thick insulated material of her wetsuit did little to conceal her willowy figure. ‘I never met a doctor who recommended a midnight constitutional in the freezing sea,’ she said archly.

‘And I never met a nocturnal scuba diver. Surely there’s not a good deal you can see?’

She shone a powerful torch in his eyes. He cried out in annoyance and threw the towel over it. Stacy took it with satisfaction and began to dry her own hair.

‘You come prepared,’ noted the Doctor.

‘And you don’t. No change of clothing?’ She frowned as he began to undo his trouser buttons. ‘Were you planning on removing all your clothes here?’

‘Well I can’t leave them on!’ he protested. ‘I could catch my death!’

‘Where are you staying?’

‘I don’t know. Where are we, anyway?’

‘OK, fine.’ She sighed, put the torch in a large holdall and hefted it on to her shoulder. ‘You’re a total wacko. I’ll just leave you to your moonlit skinny-dipping and find me a different stretch of beach.’ She crunched off over the stony shore. ‘Try not to drown again, OK? Bye.’

‘Wait!’ he called. ‘What are you looking for out here at night, when there’s no one about?’

‘The fish off Newhaven are something else,’ she called back to him. He could hear the frustration in her voice. ‘Really. Goodnight, now.’

The Doctor pondered her disappearing figure. In her haste she had dropped something. A yellow tag, a band of thick plastic scored with cracks. In blurred black ink was recorded a reference number of some kind.

He watched her dark figure retreat up the beach, only her blonde hair dimly visible in the gloom. Then he went back to the TARDIS, twirling the tag round his finger, thoughtfully trying to place her face.

As Stacy approached the weathered, peeling porch door of the building she knew she was back in the old nightmare.

Sure enough and good as gold she started picking her way through a basement apartment. The light didn’t work in the hallway, but no great loss since there was nothing there to see. All the belongings were stored out back, crowded in together as if for comfort. You had to feel your way down a gloomy passage till you came to the windowless bedroom, large and square with thick walls. Throws on the bed, ugly, patterned things, chosen by someone crazy. The TV with the busted tube was set to the listings channel, telling her everything she might watch if her head could just hold on to any of the details long enough.

And he was there again, waiting for her, though this home wasn’t hers. He was pulling her to the bed. The tight bruise of his grip made her feel alive for a moment or two and she fell back unresisting and then she was

waking up in a soaking nightshirt and damp nylon sheets and sitting up straight, panting.

All a dream, just a dream.

The little room was cool, the chintzy curtains glowing with morning sunlight. The blanket on the bed was plain pink, no patterns. She pulled the 71

collar of her nightshirt away from her neck, sank back into her stiff pillows. It was OK. All OK.

Another fine day welcomed her, and she would waste it once more down in the depths.

Stacy noticed Mrs Doland was looking at her oddly as she came down for breakfast. Was it the heavy bags under her eyes? She felt she'd barely slept a wink last night. Was her skirt tucked into her knickers? She couldn't even be bothered to look.

Some vacation this was. Yet another day and night's futile searching, yet another icky breakfast from Ye Olde English B&B, served up in the dining room taste forgot.

'You have a visitor for breakfast,' she said, her pouchy face impassive. 'I wasn't going to seat him since he don't want a room, but he's polite, even if his hair is too long. Student, probably.'

'What?'

'He says he's your doctor.' She sniffed. 'Besides, he's paid for the full English but only ordered the continental. That's the sort of guest I like. No bother.'

She looked at Stacy meaningfully, then stepped aside to let her pass.

Her doctor?

Now Stacy *did* check her skirt wasn't tucked into her knickers, before going through into the dowdy dining room. It was like a 1950s front room had collided with a 1970s thrift store. The wallpaper was red and flocked but the tables were draped in laminated plastic blue gingham. Brown velvet curtains fiercely fought back any sunlight that might dare encroach, so most light came from an orange spherical black-and-white TV perched on a wormy oak dresser, which offered flickering views of the breakfast news.

And there, the only guest, was the madman from last night, further confusing the period décor in his Edwardian dress. He was sitting engrossed in his breakfast, weighing a bread roll experimentally in his hand.

‘What are you doing here?’ Stacy snapped.

‘You saved my life,’ he said, without looking up. ‘I wanted to do something for you.’

‘How did you find me?’

‘By asking for you at every B&B and hotel in the area until I got lucky.’ He looked up at last, his eyes smiling as he gestured round the room. ‘And didn’t I get lucky! Sit down and help me with this bread roll. I’ve known atoms that were easier to split.’

Stacy smiled a little. He was crazy, sure, but she’d rather look at him than at a black and white TV.

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‘You left this behind, last night.’ He delved in his pocket and pulled out the yellow tag.

She stared at it. ‘Oh, that.’ It must’ve fallen out when she’d yanked out the towel for him. ‘Well, I don’t really need it. I checked it out already.’

‘It’s been in the water some time,’ the Doctor observed. ‘What was it tagging, do you know?’

She looked at him appraisingly then let him have it. ‘At one point, a body.’

He didn’t react. ‘James Edward Cuthbertson, died 1977 in Hastings after a brain haemorrhage, aged 82. He was a fisherman who wanted to give something back to the fish who sustained him. All properly catalogued and referenced, all above board.’

‘But below sea level.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘You seem disappointed. Were you hoping to find someone else?’

At that point, the door opened and Mrs Doland walked in. Stacy swiftly ordered her usual: ‘A bowl of muesli and a Greek yoghurt, please.’

Mrs Doland glared at her and shambled back out.

Stacy stared down at the stale roll. 'I'm not some marine grave robber if that's what you're thinking,' she said more quietly.

There was a colder glint in the Doctor's eyes. 'So why are you snaffling trophies from those buried at sea?'

'And how is that your business?'

'You'd be surprised by what my business encompasses,' the Doctor remarked, as he began buttering a piece of burnt toast. 'I frequently am.'

She shrugged. 'All right. I'm looking for evidence.'

'Evidence of what?' He took a bite.

'Murder.'

The Doctor's eyes widened and he grinned with buttery lips. 'How thrilling!

Whose?'

'I . . . I don't know for sure.' She sighed. 'And there's a lot of sea out there.'

He took a swig of orange juice. 'Sounds like your search may be fruitless,'

he said, plonking down his glass with a grimace. 'Much like this stuff. Whole story, please.'

'Got time on your hands, huh?'

'Amongst other things, yes.'

'I don't know. . . .' Stacy bit her lip. 'I'm not exactly hanging out for someone else to call me crazy.'

'Don't worry. After this breakfast anything will seem palatable.'

So she told him. She hadn't spoken out loud about it for some time; she'd grown too wary of the incredulous looks, the whispers behind her back, the sympathetic smiles. But the Doctor just folded his arms and let her speak.

'I'm a psychologist and care worker, attached to the correctional facility at Applegate, NY. Mainly I deal with youth offenders. But one day a guy in his forties snuck on to my list of cases. A real charmer. And an ex-con.'

'What was his crime?'

'Robbery with violence. . . They tried to pin murder on him too – three cases, but they couldn't make it stick in court. He knocked off rich people's joints and took every jewel they owned. Had a thing for diamonds.'

'Really.' The Doctor's tone was mild, but Stacy saw the way his eyes had lit up a fraction.

'He'd served his time, and got out. Travelled for a while then, he said, spent time over here in England. But he came back and he came to me. . . ' Stacy shrugged. 'Got himself referred, specially, I don't know why. I just wish to God he never had, you know?' She gave a hollow laugh. 'Now I think I'm never going to have him out of my head.'

'Go on,' said the Doctor softly.

'He said. . . He said he was a murderer.'

'He was confessing to those three cases?'

'I thought so at first, once I'd done some checking up and found out his background. But no. He claimed he'd murdered, or arranged for the murder, of twenty people in the last three years. He gave me a list of his victims and the date each of them died. He told me how he placed a coin in the mouth of each of them when he was through. His mark of respect, he called it.'

'A coin in the mouth?' The Doctor nodded slowly. 'An ancient Greek custom.'

The dead were buried with a coin in the mouth – payment to ensure Charon the ferryman would take their souls across the River Styx to Hades.'

'You read a lot,' said Stacy wryly.

'Of late, I feel I may have read too much. Do carry on.'

‘He. . . He showed me pictures of the bodies.’ She stared the Doctor right in the eye. ‘Videos, in some cases, of what had been done to them.’

‘He confessed?’ The Doctor frowned. ‘He wanted to be put back inside?’

‘It was a kind of confession, I guess. But he didn’t seem to blame himself, he blamed those he was killing. Said they were doing it to themselves and he was just the instrument. Well, it’s a classic deflection, a textbook abdication of responsibility, freedom from guilt.’ She paused. ‘Almost textbook.’

‘Go on.’

Stacy took a deep breath. ‘All the people he claimed were murdered were still alive.’

‘A delusion, then.’

‘I saw the photos. . . ’ She shuddered.

‘Could they have been fakes?’

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‘And the tapes. I showed them to experts. There were protracted scenes of violence and mutilation. . . I don’t think anyone was convinced they were watching special effects. They may have been able to suspend their disbelief but they sure couldn’t hold on to their stomachs.’

‘But if the apparent victims were all alive. . . ’

‘All of them. Never heard of their nemesis, and all entirely unharmed.’

The Doctor leaned back in his chair. ‘So how do you explain it?’

‘I’ve been told by a hundred well-respected shrinks and doctors that I should let the whole thing go, that it’s all just some hoax this guy is playing.’ She could feel herself trembling, checked her watch to see when she could pop her next downer. ‘You might say I’m crazy, Doctor, but I believe he has killed or arranged the deaths of all these people. All right, not *really* them, ’cause they’re still alive. But maybe it’s their identical twins they never knew they had, or maybe he made the victims up to resemble these people or something. . . ’

‘Or something,’ the Doctor agreed, looking thoughtful.

Mrs Doland timed her entrance well, crashing in and making them both jump. She placed the muesli, a carton of milk, and a strawberry supermarket-brand yoghurt down in front of Stacy. ‘No Greek,’ she said. ‘If you don’t want strawberry you can have fruits of the forest.’

‘Strawberry’s good,’ she assured Mrs Doland, suddenly grateful for a solid, brutal dose of mundane reality. But once the greying woman left the room, the atmosphere seemed to darken once more.

‘So you’re convinced,’ said the Doctor, ‘that people have died.’

‘Uh-huh. But, hey, weirdly enough, no one wants to know. I tried to have the guy sectioned as being delusional, although I don’t believe he’s truly insane for a moment. Even so, it looked like I was making progress – and so he skipped town. I thought that was it, all done. That he was out of my life. That *True Mysteries* would run a feature on it in ten years’ time and I’d be telling all this to a camera just like I’m telling it to you.’

The Doctor rocked back in his chair. ‘So your killer, whose victims live on, came here?’

‘I received a letter postmarked London, England, six months ago. Names of more victims. More pictures.’ She paused. ‘And a coin. An old sovereign.’

‘Getting cocky,’ said the Doctor darkly.

‘He referred to the sea in this area – Newhaven, Eastbourne, Hastings –

as his “killing ground”. And he wrote on one card, “Someday you’ll see”.’

She shivered. ‘I thought if I could find some evidence, maybe another coin, *anything*. . . If I could find *him*. . .’ She stared glumly down at the dusty bowl of pellets. ‘Doctor, whatever he’s doing, he’s still doing it. And I don’t know why he’s chosen me to tell it all to but I can’t just ignore it. I can’t.’

‘Don’t worry. We won’t,’ said the Doctor.

She looked up at him, warily. 'We?'

'Your killer's name. Is it Daniel Basalt?'

She jumped up from her chair in shock, upset the table, sent milk and muesli all over the Doctor, who yelped in surprise.

'Oh my God, I am so sorry,' she said, flustered, looking round for a serviette.

'Is it?' asked the Doctor quite calmly, wiping milk from his eye.

'Yes,' said Stacy.

'I know of him. His activities are bothering me, too. We have to find out what's going on.'

Mrs Doland burst into the room and stared in horror at the crime scene.

'Don't worry,' the Doctor said soothingly. 'The bread roll didn't hit any vital organs. I'm fine.'

'You're out on your ear,' roared Mrs Doland. 'Both of you!'

Stacy stood and stared. 'Why?'

'For coming in at all hours, dripping all over the carpets! For having food fights!' She pointed accusingly at the Doctor. 'For bringing in *students!*'

Suddenly the Doctor started giggling.

'I'd better go pack, then,' Stacy murmured, struggling to keep a straight face herself. But as the Doctor dissolved in laughter she couldn't contain her own.

She packed quickly, barely believing the relief she felt after trailing through so many edgy months. The Doctor wasn't humouring her. He actually believed her.

She stuffed the ragged bundle of postcards into the very bottom of the bag, gripped by a renewed determination.

The Doctor was waiting outside for her in the quiet street, no trace of his previous levity about the hard lines of his face. 'I know a place you can lodge for a while,' he said, 'somewhere near to my own centre of

investigations. But our business here isn't finished yet.' He glanced down disdainfully at her two overstuffed suitcases. 'Tell your landlady you'll collect your luggage later.'

'Who are you?' Stacy asked. 'Really?'

'I can tell you what I am. I'm worried.' He grinned. 'Very worried.'

'Why did you really come looking for me today, before you knew about any of this?' She scowled. 'And skip the cute answers, OK?'

'Would you believe coincidence?' He pulled a face. 'I wouldn't. There's no such thing as chance encounters.' He blew out the same deep, heart-rending sigh as he had last night.

'Was that sigh for Matthew Arnold's mermaid with the screwy eyes again?'

'No, that was for you,' he said. 'I did recognise you last night. I'd seen your picture. . . in a book.'

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Thirteen

En lieu oblique

Chloe has a good memory. And as she walks off after Basalt, she remembers the day when everything fell into place. Long, long ago now. A day she's relived so many times.

She, Erasmus and Jamais were wandering the stony road that wound through the outskirts of St Raphael.

'I hope he'll be happier here,' she said, looking back to the beautiful villa at the base of the vineyard. 'Happier than he was.'

'It's a beautiful place,' said Erasmus. 'Our chosen one will get on very well here. You know he will.'

It was a warm day in early May, 1830. Fireflies danced in the myrtle hedges.

The fruit trees, thick with foliage, were surrendering their last, faded blossoms. Jamais was amusing himself by placing his black paws only on the narrow patches of ground free of olive blooms. It was like he was dancing a jig, and he pranced all the more energetically once he'd

seen her grinning with delight at his antics.

They wandered into town, trying to decide where next to go.

‘Paris!’ Chloe said brightly.

Erasmus frowned. ‘We were there only a year past.’

‘A different Paris,’ said Chloe. ‘Like the one we took Charles the Sixth to.’

Erasmus smiled. ‘All right. Once we’ve rested here a day or two.’

Chloe nodded, quite content, and tousled Jamais’s ear. He gave up his dance to lean in against her, feet trailing through the fallen flowers.

They soon encountered some maids, washing white sheets in the stream.

Chloe watched them a while.

‘It’s funny, isn’t it?’ she murmured. ‘The way people move to the flow of the streams and the rivers.’

‘How do you mean?’ Erasmus asked.

‘The water picks a path for itself without anybody’s help, or anybody’s care,’

she said dreamily. ‘People accept that they’re governed by it, moved by it.

Water is life. It is life carving a strange path for itself.’

Erasmus thought on this a while. ‘You’re saying that time is like the streams and rivers.’

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Chloe nodded with a self-conscious smile. The thought was her own, not one she had borrowed from a book. ‘But we can see the same river a million ways. We can see each curve and stretch, each tiny difference. Take people from one river to another.’ She smiled. ‘Nobody in the universe can do what we’re doing, can they?’

‘We’re only ferrymen,’ Erasmus told her. ‘As Charon ferried the dead into Hades.’

‘I know. But that’s just a story.’

Erasmus considered this view. ‘It’s a good one, though.’

Chloe smiled at him and nodded. ‘Erasmus. . . ’ She paused, her attention taken by some trailing flowers, long clusters of yellow and white. ‘Hades was split into three, wasn’t it? The heroes go to the Elysium fields.’ She tapped the flowers. ‘The ordinary people go to the shadowlands, the fields of Asphodel.

And the evil ones go to Tartarus, to be punished in fire forever.’ She bit her lip. ‘But where will we go, Erasmus, when we die?’

Erasmus looked unhappy. ‘It’s just a story.’

‘So? Everything’s just a story. Each and every life, with a million billion zillion endings. For everyone we help there’s a trillion we don’t.’

‘That doesn’t make us bad. We do good, like the Blessed Destroyer did good.

We can’t help everyone,’ Erasmus reminded her. ‘Just those you’re guided to.’

‘We’re not bad,’ she told herself firmly. When she died, Chloe wanted to flit about in Asphodel’s shadows, like the birds twittering above them now in the warm blue skies. But in truth she wasn’t sure where she might find herself.

She slipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out one of her new diamonds.

The ancient Greeks had thought lots of funny things. Some believed that diamonds were living beings, formed by a chemical reaction from astral spirits in the air. . .

She held up the diamond so its facets caught the light. ‘Anyone inside?’ she whispered.

Jamais gave a low yelp and scared one of the maids. She looked up at him in alarm. Chloe giggled.

‘Come on,’ said Erasmus, walking a little faster into the heart of the city.

‘Let’s find someone who will clear up after us.’

It would soon be sunset, and the streets would hum to the chanting of Hail Marys. Chloe held on to Jamais's collar tightly as Erasmus steered them through a bustling street market thronged with shoppers.

There was a commotion, raised voices. Screams and gasps and the sound of heads breaking.

Jamais broke Chloe's grip on his collar and tore away down the street.

'Come back!' shouted Chloe. She sprinted after him, ignoring Erasmus's own

shouts, his demands that she stop still and wait here.

A man, a wealthy merchant by the look of the fine silks and linens he wore, lay on the ground propped up by one elbow. 'Thief,' he gasped to the concerned onlookers, clutching his bloody head. 'He stole my diamonds. My diamonds!'

Chloe's eyes sparkled at the thought of the tiny jewels, their beauty and their strength. She ran on after Jamais, after the robber. There was no difficulty following his trail, she could hear her friend's frantic footfalls up ahead out of view, could feel the tiny ripples in time that flared with his nostrils, steamed with his quickening breaths.

She turned into a narrow, high-walled street, and found him, alert and tensed, stealthily creeping up to a crossroads. She danced lightly over to join him, pressed her back against the warmed stucco front of a tall house, and peeped round the corner.

Two men stood in the quiet dusty road. One was skinny and shaking, whooping ragged breaths, a small velvet purse in his hand. The thief. He stood before a man who dwarfed him, tall and heavysset, dressed dashing in some kind of military greatcoat. He had a full, pale face. Chloe could see the glitter of amusement in his small dark eyes even across the street. He held out one enormous hand for the stolen purse.

'Really, D'Amantine,' he sighed, and his voice was like rich spiced fruit.

'Gifts for your old master. A generous gesture, but a foolhardy one. You will not serve me as a dead man, or as a caitiff rotting in gaol. You must sow the seed, D'Amantine.' He took the little purse in one hand and closed his great fingers on it, and cupped the man's cheek with the other. Chloe shivered to see those hands. She felt that if he held a lump of coal in his palm he could grind his own diamond from

it in an absent-minded gesture.

The thief, D'Amantine, flinched suddenly, slapped a hand to his cheek where the large fellow had touched him.

'Run, now,' said the man. 'You mustn't linger here.'

Treating this more as a command than a caution, D'Amantine bolted away, darted down the next street.

And the big, bearlike man saw that Chloe stood watching. There was such intensity in his gaze that Chloe flinched with a hoarse gasp.

At once, Jamais pushed past her and let out a menacing growl, guarding his friend. And then Chloe saw the man's eyes and realised something awful, something that had not happened before. The big man looked at Jamais and clearly didn't see the image of the big black dog her friend projected. He saw Jamais for what he was, and the bristling tip of the powers over which he had unreasoned, animal command.

The man crouched forwards, looking at Chloe again, resting his hands on 79

his knees. 'Do I scent a spy?' he rasped, like a pantomime giant. 'What do those eyes see, I wonder?'

With unexpected speed he chased towards her. Chloe shrieked, and Jamais growled and snarled and finally flew to attack him. He grabbed the man's coat, tearing at the pocket.

'No!' the man commanded, furiously. He brought a hamlike fist down on Jamais's snout. Jamais yelped and staggered back, and his sharp teeth ripped through the coat lining and tore the pocket free. It flopped to the ground and suddenly diamonds were scattering in the dirt-filled gutters.

The man swiped again at Jamais with the back of his hand and caught him a blow on the hip that bowled him over and over. Chloe shrieked and threw herself at the man.

But in her fear she had forgotten her nature. She drifted through the alternatives. The tiniest touch from others and she knew what they were, what they might be, what would befall them and if their silly dreams could stand a chance. And if she felt sad she would root around the one true reality and find a happier moment for that

person, that one in a million, timeless moment.

Seizing hold of this man, it was like she had thrown herself from a high cliff to splash down through thick black ice.

Sabbath was the name he had taken.

Sabbath had taken so many things.

He knew of the time lores.

Sabbath pinned down with certainty the things Chloe could only feel.

He could not, would not dream; sleep for him was a necessary function, not one to be polluted by random sentiment.

For Chloe, who mixed mad jumbles of life, Sabbath's touch was the cold, warning rattle of approaching death. A rational, calculated absolute that would not be cheated.

The ice that trapped her cracked, and *she sees him suddenly in his special ship staffed only by apes. A long skinny man, a little streak of nastiness, stands beside him.*

'D'Amantine brought you the diamonds!' Skinny Man rubs his delicate hands together. *'I knew. . . '*

'A dangerous joke,' grumbles Sabbath.

'Simply a demonstration of my skill.' Skinny Man smiles and shows skinny teeth. *'I instilled that impulse in the first subject. It has become a hereditary memory, passed through three generations now.'*

'But will there be a fourth?' Sabbath steeple his fleshy fingers. *'He was a fool, he acted on your clever impulse the moment I recalled him. He's a wanted man now.'*

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Skinny Man takes a little vial from Sabbath; it has a needle point that scratched D'Amantine and stole his blood. Skinny Man holds it up to the light like he can divine the future of the thief from these dark drops. 'He will go to ground, and perform as instructed.' When Skinny Man smiles he smiles like a ghoul. *'Aside from the diamonds he will bring when recalled, nothing else matters to him.'*

'His diamonds do not matter to us, now.' Sabbath watches his apes as they

work his ship's controls, acting on the few fragments of the dark lore they comprehend, adjusting, supposing, conducting the engines' operation. Then his vision shifts and Chloe sees that he sees her, and that he is smiling too.

'Our task is to be made so much easier,' he says, 'our way back to the beginning safe and assured. . . '

'As I maintained it would be,' says Skinny Man slyly, 'all along.'

And Sabbath has hold of her and slings her child's body against the ground.

Chloe couldn't move, both breath and sense slammed out of her. She could feel dirty diamonds digging into her back. As she spiralled into her own darkness she felt their hard points squirming against her skin like they wanted to get inside.

She awoke and it was dark. She was laying face down in the gutter. The diamonds had been snatched up and away, of course. Sabbath was long since gone. Jamais's dark, comforting shape sat crouched beside her, keeping guard.

Instinctively she reached out to stroke him. He squealed, and the noise tore her properly awake. Jamais was hurt. She looked at him anxiously, but there was a sparkle in his eyes. And in his mouth.

His jaws opened, and Chloe saw that on the tip of his slobbery tongue was a single diamond.

'You clever boy,' she whispered, and took the gem with shaking hands. It was of those that had spilled from Sabbath's pocket, and it was beautiful; better than the ones Erasmus got for her. There was something about it, different from the gem she had held up to the light by the stream. This one not only caught the light, it held on to it. It flickered and pulsated.

Chloe decided she would keep quiet about this.

Then she saw something square and heavy lying close by on a doorstep.

It was a large, leather book. On its cover was a geometric design of some kind, angular, overlapping triangles almost like the facets of a cut diamond themselves.

She lifted it – it was surprisingly light – and her fingers tingled with

warmth.

The first page was blank. She turned to look overleaf.

A picture of herself was looking sadly back up at her.

81

Chloe froze. And she knew in that second that now she had picked up the book, she would never be able to put it back down again.

She felt for her shoulder bag, pulled out the fruit she'd been saving for later and discarded it. The book was a perfect fit for her bag, just as she feared it would be.

Erasmus rounded the corner of the narrow street. 'Are you hurt?' he asked.

Chloe didn't know how she felt. Perhaps she should look in the book when she got home, maybe that would tell her.

'You shouldn't have run from me.' Erasmus looked stern and unhappy. 'I look after you as I did in the Old Time. It's the rules.'

She had the good grace to look guilty. 'I'm sorry, Erasmus.'

'It's time we left here. No Paris for you. We'll go forward another few years.

See what you find there.'

Chloe nodded. The book felt light on her back, but the diamond clamped in her sweaty hand burnt and bit at her soft skin, made her wrist ache just to carry it. She needed hard, plastic hands like her dolly if she were to keep it.

Or maybe she could mount it in metal and wear it on a chain. It was beautiful and special. It didn't matter that it had come from Sabbath, and the Skinny Man with the terrible smile. Beauty was beauty, whatever its source. She would keep this diamond just for her.

They left for their home, hidden on the clifftops overlooking the warm Mediterranean.

Next morning, she emerged to take a last look at the breathtaking view. The slapdash sea was higgledy-piggledy with sailing boats, a mad array of billowing sails and hard wooden lines, curves and

straights.

She thought of her clever idea about the twisting, turning river, and she thought of Sabbath. The turns did not interest him. Men like him would construct canals, efficient and measurable, a clear, straightforward route from start to finish.

She went to her room and picked up the book. It felt heavier now. Her fingers were sweating stickily. They seemed to be choosing for themselves the place she would open the book.

The leathery volume creaked open. Chloe stared down at a picture of Sabbath and D'Amantine printed on the yellowing paper. On the next page was the scary Skinny Man.

This wasn't a storybook. It was a book about her. A chronicle of all she had done, and all she would help bring about.

Chloe longed to turn to the last chapter to learn how the story would close.

Would she find herself in Asphodel or Tartarus? But more than that, she longed to throw the whole book away, to fling it from the cliff to the lapping 82

sea far below. She didn't want her life to be caught flat in the pages of a book.

It was like someone was doing to her what she did to others. She should throw the thing away.

But she couldn't.

And once, when she tried to peek at the ending, the book taught her a lesson. The book took her eyes and twisted them, bent them out of shape.

Made it easier for the tears to leak out.

She'd never dared look again.

The book was more her governor than poor, silly, half-brained Erasmus.

Chloe remembers all this as she traipses along after Basalt through the grime of London more than 170 years later. That was the last of her sunny days.

It's as if the book and the diamond stole the light, somehow. And she sees something like mist in her eyes, figures shifting and circling, like a gathering of ghosts has blown in from nowhere.

83

Fourteen

Telling tales

Fitz felt sick, just crouching there in the garden in the aftermath of the old woman's killing. He knew he ought to call the police. That was what you did when you witnessed a murder. The police would come and sort everything out, it was their job. Just dial 999 and it would all be over.

Except the Doctor had said, whatever happened, no police. If Basalt was arrested, how could he lead any of them to the truth – the truth he couldn't extract from that difficult little girl, playing her little games?

And thinking about it, how would Fitz explain what he was up to, hiding in the old dear's back garden?

Well, he couldn't stay here, that was for sure. The TV was still blaring loudly inside the house. What if, under the cover of that racket, Basalt had sneaked outside? He might've noticed Fitz out here and come looking. . .

Holding his breath, Fitz edged clear of the conifer and sprinted for the side alley.

As he reached there, and stole up to the wooden gate, the noise of the TV

stopped. His stomach squirmed again. He could hear the sound of the front door closing. Someone coming out?

No. There were no footsteps. Someone had just gone inside the house.

He listened for any further movement but there was none.

Fitz gave it a few minutes to be absolutely sure, then scrambled over the gate and edged up to the front garden. He saw that a white, unmarked van, battered and crusted with rust, was now parked right outside. He took a deep breath and quickly crossed the garden in long

loping strides. Only when he reached the other side of the street and had the fat trunk of an oak to hide behind did he chance a look back at the crippled lady's house.

He blinked.

There was the old girl now, looking out of the window. There was no mistaking it was her – even from here, in the dim light cast by the lamps of her living room, her beautiful blue eyes sparkled just the same as before. Something about her was different, though.

She was standing up.

Look, ma, no wheels.

85

Fitz couldn't believe it. He'd seen her, what Basalt had done to her, barely a half-hour ago. Now not only was she entirely unharmed, she was actually a new improved model with posable leg action. What the hell was going on?

Gripping the rough bark of the tree, Fitz wondered what he should do now.

The short answer – keep absolutely still – came to him seconds later when the front door opened and Basalt stepped out, dressed in a different suit and carrying a holdall. He was followed out by two other dark-suited men, one carrying a bulky bundle wrapped in bin-bags, the other half a ton of cleaning materials. Suspicious, Fitz noted. Very suspicious.

Basalt opened up the back of the van and the men dumped their burdens inside. Then all three got inside and the van spluttered and rattled into life.

As it pulled away, Fitz made a mental note of the numberplate. He was glad to see the back of the thing, and Basalt too.

Now he was alone, he started to tremble, but he knew he couldn't just leave things there. Wishing he felt less nauseous, Fitz crossed the street, went up to the woman's front door and knocked smartly. No one answered. He knocked a second, and a third time.

Finally, the woman answered. She was back in her wheelchair, but she was clumsy as hell, banging the wood against her wheels' metal frame

like this was the first time she'd opened her own front door.

'Can I help you?' she asked him, looking up at him nervously with those startling eyes.

'I'm one of your neighbours,' Fitz announced. 'From number 132.'

'Oh, goodness, yes of course,' said the woman, visibly relaxing. 'How are you?' She looked apologetic. 'I'm afraid I can't offer you anything in the way of refreshments, I'm feeling a little –'

'That's OK,' said Fitz. 'It's just. . . Well, it was quite noisy here a little while ago.' He studied her lined face closely. 'Seemed you were having quite a party.'

'Goodness, no, not at my age. It's the quiet life I enjoy.' She smiled a little uncertainly. 'I'm sorry to have disturbed you.'

Fitz couldn't understand it. Was she being got at? 'Your twin sister wasn't round just now, was she?'

'Twin sister?' the woman echoed incredulously. 'I don't have a twin sister.'

Fitz looked into her eyes and felt sure she was telling the truth. 'Look, love, nothing's wrong, is it? Only –'

'Of course not.' Her eyes glistened. 'Everything's fine. Wonderful, in fact.'

She looked away, slightly abashed. 'I'm moving away, actually. Tomorrow.'

'That's a bit of a sudden step, isn't it?' Fitz asked. 'I didn't see the signs go up.'

'Private sale,' she said with a smile. 'I'm moving up north to be with my husband, Charles. He's. . . he has to work there.'

86

'Suppose someone's got to,' said Fitz, making her tinkle with polite laughter.

'Well, goodbye. It's been fun, but. . . '

'Oh, it has, yes,' the woman assured him. 'But one has to move on,

doesn't one? From time to time.'

'It's amazing what some people move on from.' He gave her a weak wave.

'Bye, then.'

He could hear her clanking about trying to get the door closed halfway back to his car. Fitz recalled the old dears down his mum's old hospital, how speedy they were at getting themselves about. This woman had never used a wheelchair before in her life, he was sure of it. And judging by her reaction to her 'neighbour' he'd give odds she had set neither foot nor wheel in that house prior to this evening.

It felt uncommonly cold as Fitz made his way back to the car, and from there the long drive up to London.

87

Fifteen

Which came first, egg or chicken?

Anji and Guy lay slumped together against a tree in Battersea Park, panting for breath. The thin blue of the sky was turning grey as the afternoon dragged on towards the end of office hours. Kids were kicking footballs, dogs were being walked, ducks were being overfed. And Guy's mum was close by, roaming the park with a zombie expression and a wicked looking machete.

'I knew it was a mistake to get in touch with her,' Anji grumbled.

'OK, OK.' Guy shot her a disgruntled look. 'You've made it very clear that all I've done all day is make mistakes.'

'Well, I hope you're learning from them,' said Anji curtly. 'I've had enough of beating people up on your behalf.'

Once they'd made it away from the scene outside the hospital, Guy had woken with a shock to the fact he must now be fast becoming a candidate for London's Most Wanted. And when the world's falling down, when no one else understands you and you can't trust your friends, what do you do?

You skulk off with your tail between your legs and tell your mum and dad.

Or, in this case, just your mum – Guy's dad had died when he was small.

Anji had advised against it, but Guy was shaken and upset, and rather than risk him skipping off again by himself and her have to go after him, she'd caved in.

Mistake.

Everything had been going great until Guy got within twenty feet of his mother. Then out came the machete and the mad eyes, and off they'd run.

'We'll be all right if we stay out of sight,' Guy said. 'Silly old dear'll get arrested waving that thing about like a maniac.'

'What did you do to upset her?' Anji asked.

'I guess I owe her some money,' Guy confessed. 'But I thought she was cool about it.'

'Anything else?'

Guy thought for a time. 'She's got a long memory. Could be anything.'

'Great.'

'I just thought. . . ' He bit his lip, clearly until he trusted himself to carry on.

'I can accept someone could make the people who maybe don't know me so 89

well turn against me, but. . . '

'I know,' said Anji softly. 'When it's your own mum. . . ' She shook her head sadly. She'd given her parents reason enough in her youth to chase after her (or one or two young men) with a machete, but the look on Guy's face when he realised what his mum must have in mind. . .

'That's got to hurt,' she

muttered.

Guy looked at her, clicked his tongue nervously. 'Can't trust a soul, can I?

How long before you go all wacko on me again?’

Anji forced a smile. ‘Better treat me good, boy.’

‘Ha, ha.’

‘Look, I don’t know what came over me this morning,’ she said awkwardly.

‘But since. . . Since then I’ve been fine.’

She thought of the little girl – ‘*Jamais will keep trying to keep the mists away,*’

Chloe had told her. ‘*And I will watch over you until my eyes run out*’ – but didn’t want to mention her to Guy. He was weirded out enough as it was.

‘I know what came over you. That mist stuff.’

‘Yeah, but it’s not real mist, is it? It’s something in our sight, or in our heads or something. . . ’ Anji sighed. ‘We need to start finding some answers to all this stuff.’

‘Why was Mike still going on about what I might’ve seen on his stupid desk?’

Guy tapped a finger against his lips. ‘All this stuff kicked off when he came back from his holiday.’

‘You think that could be a link?’ asked Anji.

Guy shrugged. ‘It’s about the only lead we’ve got, right?’

‘Then let’s check it out tonight.’

They waited until 6.30 p.m. before going back to Smith Square; not so early that the place would be swarming still with people, but not so late that they’d stand out a mile. Guy signed her in without drawing any undue attention; the man at the desk, judging by his knowing smile, clearly remembered her from the day before – and didn’t seem to realise that Guy was a man on the run from practically everyone.

As Guy had guessed, Mike was not at his desk. The office was deserted.

‘Always goes home at five-fifteen on the dot,’ he grumbled, looking

through the post that had appeared in his in-tray. 'Whatever happens, you can depend on that. It's his bowels.' He managed a fair impersonation of Mike's irritating tones: 'Can't abide public facilities, Guy. My bum kisses my own toilet or none at all.'

'You so didn't have to tell me that.' Anji attacked a pile of paperwork on Mike's desk. 'Now, what are we looking for here?'

90

'Careful,' Guy chastised her. 'He keeps everything in order, he'll know if it's not there.' He stared at the desk like he had X-ray vision. 'But if he was up to something dodgy. . . why leave a file on public display?'

'Maybe he'd misfiled it.' Anji clicked her fingers. 'Or it came in while he was away. When did he leave?'

'He was gone all last week.'

'Then that's the period we'll check.' Anji started up Mike's computer. 'You take his files. I'll go through his computer.'

'No good. I don't have his log-in password.'

'I do,' said Anji. She crossed to the desk she'd sat at the day before. 'Or rather, the PA does. Everyone in the department's got theirs in the card index.'

She raised and rattled it. 'Kept under E for Emergencies.'

'Jesus, you really were bored yesterday, weren't you?' Guy grinned. 'But what's the point of checking his computer? The thing I must've disturbed was hard copy.'

'That doesn't mean he wasn't sent an electronic version, does it?' said Anji.

'I'll just scoot through files and e-mails created during the window he was away.' She looked up at him. 'Unless you have any better ideas?'

'I'll check the files,' said Guy, 'and yes, all right, you're very bloody clever.'

'Thank you,' said Anji primly, and she got to work.

Anji was feeling less clever 45 minutes later when she'd unearthed absolutely nothing of interest, and neither had Guy. In terms of

suspect e-mail correspondence there was a tiny MPEG attachment of a man being gored by a bull sent by some bloke in accounts and a number of 'hilarious' jokes about blondes, but nothing more sinister than that.

His electronic documents were diligently filed. After a long, boring trawl through them, the only apparent anomaly was a file named CARGO DELIVERIES, all alone in an untitled folder within a folder full of form letters marked FEPA. It was an apparently unfinished spreadsheet detailing a schedule for a delivery of some kind of freight to the docks at Newhaven. From there, however, no destination for the cargo was listed.

She looked over at Guy, but all she could see of him was his tufty brown hair protruding from a pile of box files. 'What's FEPA?' she asked.

'Food and Environment Protection Act,' he said. 'Why?'

Just hearing the words made Anji want to yawn. 'No reason,' she sighed, and moved on.

'What a total waste of time,' said Anji ruefully, plonking down the third cup of Irish coffee in front of Guy back at her place.

91

'Not entirely.' Guy shrugged. 'After all, Mike's bound to notice someone's gone through all his stuff. He'll check with the front desk and find I was there last night, and probably get on to the police. Then they can arrest me for corporate sabotage on top of assault and battery, attempted murder and molesting a minor.' He lifted the mug. 'Cheers!'

Anji found herself trying to stifle a smile. There he was, crashed out glumly on her couch, with tousled hair and clothes all crumpled. She did feel genuinely sorry for the man. There was something innocent and appealing about him behind the careworn manner he put on for her benefit. Or maybe it was just the warm glow the liqueur coffee was giving her.

'I have to say you're taking all this amazingly well,' she said, burning her mouth as she took too big a mouthful of the syrupy drink. 'Almost calmly, in fact.'

'Well, I kind of hit rock bottom last night, and did most of my

panicking this morning,' Guy reflected, taking another sip himself. 'And that got me precisely nowhere. Except now I know both my boss and my mum can't set eyes on me without wanting me dead.'

'So who's next? Should I expect an army of ex-girlfriends knocking on my door hoping to succeed where Julie failed?' Anji listened to herself say the words and blushed; had she meant to steer the subject round to his romantic history so obviously?

'Hardly an army,' said Guy, a touch wistfully. 'Mind you, there was that egg marketing inspector last year. . . '

'What?'

'Cassandra, the egg marketing inspector. Met her through work.'

Anji spluttered. 'You're kidding me. They pay people to inspect eggs?'

'It's true!' Guy said defensively. 'How else does the little red lion get on the shell?'

'Osmosis,' suggested Anji, and they both laughed.

'It's a stressful job, egg inspecting,' Guy argued. 'You visit wholesalers, auc-tions, egg processors. . . You have to report to the regional egg marketing inspector. . . '

'Regional? Do all the regional inspectors get together and compare egg stories?' Anji was hooting with laughter now, quite astonished by the noises she was making. This so wasn't her.

'You might find something amusing about the EU's Hatching Eggs and Chicks regulations, Anji, but frankly. . . ' He gave her a hurt look. 'That girl worked really hard, and it wasn't easy.'

Anji wondered if she'd gone too far. 'Hey. . . I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. . . I mean, I guess there has to be someone. . . keeping an eye on eggs in case. . . '

She snorted, bit her lip to fight back her giggles.

'I had to leave her in the end,' Guy said, staring into the distance. 'She was a sensitive girl and all that pressure, all those eggs. . . ' The corners of his mouth twitched in a smile. 'In the end, she cracked.'

She stared at him in amused disbelief as he burst out laughing himself. 'All that build-up. . . for that punchline?'

'It's no yolk!' he protested feebly, before convulsing with silent laughter.

She chuckled a cushion at him. 'That came out of a Christmas cracker!'

'I've really come out of my shell since meeting you. Anji.'

'STOP IT!' She chuckled another cushion at him, and knocked over the mug of coffee. It splashed over Guy's sofa and the cream carpet.

Anji swore and rushed off to get a cloth. Her head felt thick and flushed.

She came back and found Guy dabbing at the wet patch with a Kleenex.

'Leave it,' she grumped, nudging him aside. 'Bits of tissue are coming off everywhere.' She picked up the mug and checked it for damage.

'Don't be so uptight, Anji,' Guy said lightly. 'I feel like I'm walking on eggshells. . . '

But the mood, if not the mug, was broken. 'I've had too much to drink,' she muttered crossly.

'I haven't.' Guy stalked off to the kitchen, left her to her miserable mopping.

She realised with some surprise that tonight she'd just been sitting here with a bloke, relaxing and chatting and joking around. . . And it had felt good. Too good, maybe. Too normal. She wasn't great at normal these days.

Guy came back in to the living room. She could hear ice tinkling in his glass, could feel his eyes on her back. He crouched behind her. She held her breath as he traced a finger along the back of her neck, and scrubbed at the carpet so hard the pile practically smouldered.

'I had a boyfriend called Dave,' Anji blurted out angrily, 'and he died.'

There was a long silence, broken finally by the inevitable click of Guy's tongue.

'Yeah, well,' he said quietly. 'Sorry.'

Anji bit her lip, shoulders hunched, staring down at the stain. Looked like it wasn't going to shift.

She heard Guy turn and walk away, into the spare bedroom. The door closed with a quiet, definite click.

Hot tears were escaping Anji's eyes before she could even try to stop them.

She wanted to run to the room and say that she was sorry, and drag him back out and lay him down on the couch again and for them to carry on as before.

But she couldn't. She stayed crouched where she was.

They made a good team, she decided. Him with the wisecracks about eggs.

Her the chicken.

93

She rose shakily, wiped her eyes, drained her own mug in one grimacing gulp, and went into her bedroom. The sheets smelled safe and just of her, and the pillow was soft, so she cried into that.

94

Sixteen

Night thoughts

'Hello, honey, I'm home!' hollered Fitz as he came crashing through the front door. It was gone one o'clock in the morning, he was knackered, troubled and had somewhat childishly resolved to wake up Trix the second he got back in after his long journey.

'How'd it go?' she called calmly from the bedroom.

Fitz sighed and wandered in. She was propped up in bed in a black T-shirt, engrossed in a chat show on the portable with a big box of chocolates beside her.

'Not great,' Fitz confessed. 'Basalt killed someone.'

'God, really?' Trix finally tore her eyes from the screen at that and popped another chocolate in her mouth. 'Who?'

‘Some woman in her fifties.’

‘Tell me what happened.’

‘I’d rather not. Anyway, it’s all fine and dandy, because the same woman was fit and well again half an hour later.’

Trix paused mid-chew. ‘Have you been drinking?’

Fitz shook his head. ‘It’s mad. I know. But I saw the woman, terrified, bleeding, Basalt laying in to her. Then I called round once he’d left and. . .

there she was!’

‘An identical twin?’

‘I thought maybe at first, but. . .’ He shook his head. ‘Timeless offers a safe murder service. A twin would be missed, surely. By her twin sister for a start.’

‘Unless her twin was in on it. . .’ Trix shook her head, apparently dismissing the idea. ‘A double, then. Someone in make-up, to put people off the scent.’

‘Maybe. She did say she was moving away. . .’ Fitz wanted to believe such a rational explanation in a way. ‘I don’t know though. It was an exact double.’

Right down to the eyes. . .’

Trix shrugged. ‘Clones, then. They’re cloning people so they can kill them without any worries. The original is still about.’ Her face darkened. ‘Or maybe the clones are killing off their originals.’

Fitz stared at her. ‘God, do you think so?’

95

‘I think. . .’ Trix stared into space, apparently in deep thought. ‘I think I’ll have a caramel cream next.’

‘You’ll get fat,’ remarked Fitz, nonchalantly eyeing her slim form. ‘In about a hundred years time.’

‘Chocolate helps me concentrate,’ Trix told him, her eyes glued again to the TV. Fitz took the admission with the pinch of salt he reserved

for most things she came out with. 'No. Can't be clones, can it? Can you clone someone old?

I thought they'd be a baby or something.'

'Out in space you can do that, naturally,' Fitz assured her with a veteran's knowledge. 'I've seen it done. But I don't know about here.' He sighed. 'How is Basalt doing it? And why? If we were to kill this Nencini guy would another one breeze round half an hour later and act like nothing had happened?'

'Have a chocolate,' said Trix, and passed him one.

He popped it in his mouth and grimaced. 'Marzipan!'

Trix nodded in sympathy and passed him a tissue. 'Yeah, I hate those ones too.'

Fitz spat the chocolatey lump out into his hand. 'I wish I'd stayed in bed today.'

'Me too. I had a pretty crappy time.' She chomped down on a hard centre.

'If you're interested?'

'You're selling it to me.'

'I did some digging around on Nencini. Got in touch with some people I know.' She tapped her small, straight nose. 'They have access to all kinds of things. They make enquiries.'

Fitz gave her a sharp look. 'You're meant to be undercover! What if you're being followed? What if –'

'Relax,' she sighed, and shushed him so she could catch the punchline of some film star's funny story. She chuckled. 'Susan Canonshire got in touch with them. They didn't know it was me. The only thing they recognise is money. How do you think I got hold of all those forged documents for us?

Your driving licence, cash card. . . '

'I thought the TARDIS –'

Trix shushed him, eager to catch the actor's next joke. Fitz stabbed impatiently at the flicker and turned off the TV. Trix glowered at him.

‘It helps me –’

‘– concentrate? Fine. But it doesn’t help me, and I need all the help I can get, savvy?’

‘All right.’ She shrugged and turned to him, making a great show of giving him her full attention.

‘So, you have friends who forge documents,’ he said. ‘Big deal. How did they help you with the Italian?’

96

‘They can access records. Births and deaths. They can fit you up with a dead person’s or an emigrant’s identity, National Insurance number. . . ,’

‘Suppose that’s an asset in your line of work,’ said Fitz, pronouncing the last word like it was dirty.

Trix just nodded. ‘Not only is it easier to scab benefits off the government but it’s ideal for the detail in all that early life stuff if you reckon your past’s going to come under scrutiny.’

‘So Ralf and Susan Canonshire were. . . real?’

‘Yeah. But they didn’t make as nice a couple as us, believe me.’

Fitz didn’t want to know any more. The idea of standing in a dead man’s shoes made him feel somehow sordid.

‘Did the Doctor know you were doing all this. . . illegal stuff?’

‘He thought it was a good idea and trusted me to sort everything out,’ said Trix. ‘I told you. People like Basalt do their research, Fitz. If you’re caught out. . . ’

Fitz nodded. ‘I guess so. So what did you find out about Nencini?’

‘There’s no record of him existing in this country.’

‘So what, he’s visiting from abroad?’

‘I called round to the address Basalt gave us and he’s there all right. Seems pretty settled, too.’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘Lives in a total tip. Forty odd.’

Spends his days slumped in a chair half buried beneath lager cans and empty pizza boxes.'

'Sounds all right,' said Fitz. 'Did you introduce yourself, then? Make an appointment for when we can kill him without too much bother?'

'I said I was a social worker, but I don't think he much cared who I was.'

She licked her finger clean of chocolate, thoughtfully. 'He doesn't seem well.'

Depressed. "Waiting to die," he said he was, though he didn't make a whole lot of sense. . . '

'So do you think he's an illegal immigrant or something?'

'I thought it could be possible. I took a picture of him, brought it round to my contacts to see if they could place the face to any foreign records.'

'They're very well organised.'

Trix nodded agreement. 'And not cheap. In any case, they came up with a match for Signor Pietro Nencini at an address in Florence.'

'So, he is an immigrant.'

'No.'

'Well, what then?'

'I gave the place a phone call.'

'And?' Fitz swiped another chocolate from the box and held it threateningly to his mouth.

97

'And it's not so much a house as an estate. I finally got through to the very successful and extremely wealthy art dealer, Signor Pietro Nencini.' Trix frowned. 'Fitz, his voice was just the same. It was like he was the same guy –

only everything the other one wasn't.'

Fitz's jaw dropped. He stuck the sweet inside. 'A double. Or a clone.'

Or something. We're just going to have to do as the Doctor says and hope we can figure it out.'

Trix checked the calendar on the wall. 'We don't have long. We'll have caught up with ourselves next week.'

'It's a time for maximum brainpower,' Fitz asserted.

Trix nodded listlessly and counted the sweets she had left. 'Shame my concentration span is all screwed,' she sighed. 'I think it must be the caffeine in these damned chocolates.'

98

Seventeen

Dumped

'The sea in this area is his killing ground, right?' The Doctor placed an easy arm round Stacy's shoulders, steering her on a path leading down to the dock.

'That's what Basalt said.'

'Well, what are we going to find out by boat?' protested Stacy. 'We know what the sea looks like, it's what beneath that we want to know.'

'You'd prefer to keep diving, searching for that aquatic needle in a soggy haystack, I suppose,' said the Doctor, breaking stride only to savour deep, hungry breaths of the sea air. 'That's an area covering scores of square miles

– remind me, how long is your vacation?'

'I knew it was a long shot, I just felt I had to do something,' Stacy muttered.

'Don't be embarrassed,' said the Doctor. 'You're driven, I like that.' He came to an abrupt stop by a white, unmarked van, its dirty doors bumpy and scored with rust.

'What's the matter, you like that too 'cause it's driven?'

'Not much,' admitted the Doctor, gazing sulkily at the van as if it might bite him.

‘Did you see this scrapheap in a book as well?’ Stacy enquired, eyebrows raised mockingly.

‘Of course not,’ he said. ‘There’s just something about it. . . Oh no.’ He rubbed his eyes. ‘Tell me, is a mist coming in?’

The day was bright and clear. ‘No.’

He spun on his heel and stared past the stained hulks of tugboats and trawlers, out to sea. ‘No. No of course there isn’t.’ He turned back, looking suddenly tired. ‘And yet when I look at that van, it’s like I can’t quite focus, like my vision is clouding. . . ’

Much like my judgement, thought Stacy, in letting a lunatic like you lead me about. ‘Well then,’ she said patiently, ‘shall we just leave the van and move on?’

‘I was drawn here, just as you were. Except by less roundabout means.

Why?’ The Doctor rubbed his eyes again. ‘To drown me in the sea? Surely not. Perhaps to show me something. . . ’ He looked at Stacy with a sudden near-religious fervour. ‘Something you can help me with.’

99

Stacy figured it was time she asserted herself. ‘Doctor, I’ve been very patient.

I’ve saved you from a watery grave, I’ve listened to some very tall tales and even tolerated you losing me my place to stay.’ She looked at him pleadingly.

‘When you said you knew Basalt it was such a relief – I mean, I thought maybe I wasn’t totally out of my mind. But now I’m kind of thinking that I *am* totally out of my mind – and so are you.’ She took his baby-soft hand in hers. ‘Please, Doctor. Just say something that makes sense.’

‘I’m trying to piece it all together, just like you,’ the Doctor snapped, yanking back his hand like she’d burned it. ‘There’s something close by, something we’re only allowed to see in snatches. . . ’ He reached out for the van door handle and tried to open it. ‘Locked.’

‘As you might expect,’ agreed Stacy.

The Doctor closed his eyes, pressed his lips together in concentration and tapped his fingers over the lock on the driver's side. With a soft clunk, the lock button shot up. He casually opened the door.

'Doctor! What the hell are you doing?'

His eyes were watering like the van was full of chopped onions. 'Stacy, look inside, see if there's a log book, something to suggest who owns this thing.'

'Why?' She stared about, anxious that someone had seen them.

'Do it, please. Humour me. For some reason, I . . .' He banged his fist against the side of the van in frustration. 'I can't see inside.'

She could barely believe it herself when she found she was rummaging through the tapes in the glove box and rifling through empty chip packets and sandwich cartons. 'Nothing to say who it belongs to.' She found a small box of transparent plastic and opened it up. 'A clue!' she reported half-heartedly.

'Bags of absorbent padding. Biodegradable.' She dropped the box. Big deal.

Was she ever Sherlock Holmes.

'What about in the back. Look there.'

She peered through. The windows in the back doors were blacked out but enough daylight was spilling in for her to see quite clearly.

'OK, something big is in here,' she reported, 'covered by a grubby old tarp. . . .' She looked worriedly down at the dark, crusty stains that littered it. 'If I used my imagination, the tarp could be grubby with bloodstains.'

'I have a lot of respect for a healthy imagination. What's underneath it?'

Steeling herself, Stacy dragged the tarpaulin clear. 'Oh Jesus.'

'What is it?'

'Some weird kind of coffin.'

It was coffin-shaped, but came with extras. There were steel brackets at all the corners, no handles, and it was scored through with dozens

of air holes, each a little bigger than a quarter. Steel bands ran around it at regular intervals, two lengthways and several around the width of it – clearly designed 100

to keep something quite powerful inside. Something that needed the holes so it could breathe. . .

With a shudder she described it to the Doctor, concluding: ‘It doesn’t smell all that fresh back here either.’ She strained in vain to hear any signs of movement from inside the casket, but shuddered anyway. ‘And don’t even think about asking me to look inside that thing, OK? It’s not going to happen.’

‘All right. Just lock the van back up again.’

‘This is too weird.’ Stacy swiftly did as she was told. ‘I guess that makes this van an undercover hearse.’

‘Or a particularly sinister taxi.’

‘Do you think there is something alive in that box?’

He shrugged. ‘We’re not really equipped to find out, are we? I can open van doors but steel bands are another matter.’

‘Shame you can’t see for yourself. How are your eyes, now, anyway?’

The Doctor was still blinking like Mr Magoo without his glasses. ‘I think I’m receiving some sort of feedback from a form of psychic projection not attuned to organic life forms. Whatever force is trying to influence my mind, it’s still experimenting with wavelengths my mind can cope with.’

‘Well, I have a lot of respect for a healthy imagination,’ Stacy told him lightly, too freaked out by her grisly discovery to stay focused on his nonsense for long. ‘So what now? Wait until the owners come back and ask them why they’re carting coffins around in a van?’

‘It’s likely, if the van’s parked here, that the owners have some business on one of these boats,’ said the Doctor.

‘I agree.’

‘Good. So let’s walk along the docks and wait for me to go all misty-eyed.

Perhaps then we’ll find what we’re supposed to.’

‘Sure. Our destiny awaits. We have a fine and logical plan.’ Stacy sighed.

‘But I can’t think of anything better right now.’

They set off at a brisk pace. Gulls circled and shrieked high above, like they were laughing at the pair of them and their hopes for answers. The dock was busy with people of all types, from salty seadogs with big beards and chunky sweaters to suited businessmen and tanned yachting types. Stacy wondered about their stories, if they would seem wonderfully ordinary or if in fact everyone had something scary to hide.

‘There,’ said the Doctor, dabbing at his eyes with his sleeve again.

Stacy followed the line of his pointing finger. It was a white boat with walnut trim, a middle-sized, smart-looking craft named *Prometheus*. ‘Relax, Doctor. It’s not such an eyesore.’

‘You’re right. The mists are clearing. . . ’

‘You sound like a fortune teller.’

101

‘Not my line,’ the Doctor told her emphatically. ‘I don’t usually like to know what’s going to happen. But someone or something seems very insistent that I be aware of something. . . And it’s becoming more proficient at communicating.’

He began to lead the way on to the *Prometheus*.

Stacy tugged at his arm. ‘Shouldn’t we knock or something?’

‘Of course. Once we’ve had a good snoop round.’

There was no one about. Stacy followed the Doctor as he crept about the ship, peering into fishy-smelling boxes here, lifting up canvas sheets there. He seemed curiously interested in a long, large wooden crate stowed beneath a thick tarpaulin, upon which was stamped CEYLON TEA and the name of the exporter in Africa.

‘What is it?’ she asked. ‘Fancy a cup? That’s so British of you. God save the King.’

He shot her a puzzled look. ‘This crate, look at it.’

‘OK, I’m looking. Help me out here.’

‘It’s spotless.’

‘More or less.’

‘Inside and out. Not a dropped tealeaf in sight.’

‘So it’s been cleaned.’

‘Perhaps. Or perhaps this crate was never exported from Africa at all,’ he concluded impressively.

Stacy pointed to the smudged black printing. ‘I guess that could explain why whoever stamped that misspelled Namibia. And doesn’t Ceylon tea come from India or Sri Lanka or something anyway?’

The Doctor squinted at the printing in surprise. ‘Er, yes. Yes, I was wondering when you’d spot that. You’re learning.’

‘So what do we deduce from this?’

The Doctor gave her a small smile. ‘Work it out. Come on.’

They moved on, and soon she heard muffled male voices – conversation somewhere inside the cabin. The Doctor held up his hand for hush as he stole closer. Soon Stacy was close enough to hear them properly.

‘. . . expecting one more delivery after this latest one.’

‘We’ll take care of it tonight.’

‘Move the van up closer, that thing weighs a ton.’

Stacy heard heavy footsteps underscore the man’s words – was he coming out, had he heard them? She backed away, flashed the Doctor an urgent look.

He backed up too, but caught his ankle on a hatch cover, lost his balance and fell with a loud thump on to his back. He quickly gestured that Stacy should hide. But even as she looked around frantically, she heard the cabin door open and heavy, urgent footsteps rushing nearer.

Seconds later, a tall, thickset man, with long wisps of hair combed carefully over a broad bald spot, emerged from round the corner and reacted with surprise.

‘Police!’ said the Doctor halfheartedly, pushing himself up on his elbows.

‘We have you surrounded.’

The man looked between Stacy and the Doctor.

He didn’t seem impressed.

Fitz and Trix had decided to do the job at night-time after all. Trix had sussed out the area. Her conclusion: no problem, just as Basalt had said.

No fear of any prying eyes seeing them break in to Nencini’s Streatham flat.

The street lamp didn’t work round the back of his block, which overlooked the shadowy, rusting yard of a disused factory. Beyond that another stark residential tower loomed large over the street – but most of the windows were so thick with grime and grease no one could see through them anyway.

The two of them creaked and clanged up the fire escape to Nencini’s precarious balcony. No neighbours’ curtains twitched. No lights snapped on.

Fitz wondered if anyone even knew Nencini existed.

‘Are we really going through with this?’ he hissed, shocked by how loud his whisper sounded, high up here in the darkness.

Trix produced the syringe. ‘We have to. What’s the alternative?’

Fitz shuddered as she passed it to him and eased her fingers under the rotting wood of the window frame. She’d opened the window when she’d visited last week, and didn’t seem surprised he’d not shut it again. She reckoned he might move between armchair, bed and toilet, but no further afield if he could help it.

When the window was open as wide as it went, Trix nodded Fitz through.

He took a deep breath and squirmed through the gap on to a filthy

worktop.

It smelled like a toilet but he guessed this must be the kitchen, and Fitz was glad there was no light to see what he was picking his way through.

Trix was beside him in a nimble moment. The flat was gloomy, lit only by scattered moonlight through the filth on the windows. She led the way through to Nencini's pit, where a stinking hump beneath the bedclothes shook with snores.

A life, thought Fitz, or the remnants of one. There, and theirs, for the taking.

He gingerly stepped forwards with the syringe, and looked at Trix for guidance.

'Go on,' she hissed. 'Now.'

Fitz pulled back a corner of the bedsheets. In the gloom, he saw Nencini's bare arm glisten.

103

The snoring came to a spluttering halt. Nencini stirred and groaned, his eyes flickered open, just for a second. Fitz held himself stock-still.

'*Se la forma scompare. . .*' Nencini's voice was hoarse and dry. '*. . . la sua radice è eternal.*'

'What the hell does that mean?' breathed Fitz.

'I'm not sure,' said Trix.

Fitz bit his lip and dug in the needle. He pulled up on the plunger and a little blood splashed up inside.

'That'll do,' said Trix, as Nencini snorted and snuffled.

'Sure?' Fitz looked doubtfully at the dark dribble in the syringe. 'The Doctor's got to analyse that.'

'He said he only needed a drop. So come on.' Dawn was gently breathing light into the dark sky outside.

Fitz sighed. 'I can't believe he didn't wake up.'

‘Too much effort, I guess.’ She looked down at Nencini curiously. ‘I doubt he’d care we were here even if he did wake up. He’s just waiting to die, remember.’

‘Whereas we,’ said Fitz, ‘had better get packing. We’ve got our old lives to get back to, tonight.’

‘Finally,’ breathed Trix, taking the syringe from him. She wrapped it carefully in tissue and placed it in her pocket.

They left the same way as they came in.

Stacy looked nervously at the Doctor as the man on the boat called to his friends. ‘Jack! Chongy! Got company up here, say they’re Old Bill!’

They soon popped up to join him – a good-looking half-Asian guy with short black hair and a stocky bruise of a man with a ruddy red complexion.

‘Old Bill?’ The half-caste man she assumed was Chongy didn’t seem convinced.

‘Where are your uniforms, then?’ asked Jack.

The Doctor looked at him like he was stupid. ‘We’re plainclothes.’

‘Fancy dress more like,’ retorted Chongy. ‘What are you two doing here?’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, rising slowly to his feet. ‘We’re here to arrest you on the charge of conspiracy to take the empty tea crate you store back there over to a rusty white van parked down by the docks, lift the specially adapted coffin you’ve got hidden in the back into said crate, and then carry it back to the ship so it looks like you’re loading on some inconspicuous cargo – before probably dumping the coffin – though not necessarily whatever’s inside it –

overboard under cover of night.’ He smiled. ‘How does that sound? Am I close?’

104

While Chongy and Jack swapped worried glances, the balding man narrowed his eyes.

‘Oh, look at his face! I think I’m right!’ laughed the Doctor. He turned to Stacy, encouragingly. ‘Do you see his face?’

‘Looking daggers,’ she smiled, attempting a brave levity she didn’t feel while praying the Doctor had a plan.

‘Daggers, yes!’ The Doctor seemed delighted. ‘Or. . . Marlinspikes! Yes, looking marlinspikes, perhaps. That’s a more nautical term, isn’t it?’ He took a step towards the three men, and they actually took a step back, looking at each other as if to say, who the hell is this weirdo? ‘But all the marlinspikes in the world won’t protect you from Daniel Basalt when he finds out how careless you’ve been.’

The men looked positively rattled. Baldy worriedly smoothed a hand over his precarious covering of hair.

‘So you do know him,’ said the Doctor quietly.

‘Where is he?’ Stacy demanded, almost marching right up to them, ‘Tell us how to find him. Tell us all you know about him. What is he doing –’

‘All in good time, DI Stacy,’ said the Doctor hurriedly.

‘Tell me, you sons of bitches!’ Stacy couldn’t think straight; all she knew was that she had a clear link. No supposition, no crazy looks and theories, just people who could lead her to Basalt, to talk to him and find out what the hell was going on – and why he’d picked on her to torment. No way would she let this moment slide. ‘Tell me what the hell that bastard is up to and what exactly is going on!’

‘They’re not Old Bill, Tommo,’ Jack said, sneering at her. ‘A potty-mouthed yank and a poof in a waistcoat.’

‘Do you want to be on a charge of discrimination too?’ said the Doctor calmly, producing a notebook and pencil.

‘Reckon you’re right.’ Tommo, the first man, grabbed Stacy by her hair and yanked down hard. She cried out as she fell to her knees at his feet. ‘Now, who are you two?’ he snarled.

The Doctor calmly started writing in his book. ‘Assaulting a police officer, I’ll have you for that.’

‘Better make it two officers then, hadn’t we?’ said Chongy, motioning to Jack he should take on the Doctor.

‘Assaulting two officers,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘Yes, thank you. . . ’

Stacy couldn't believe he was ignoring the man's menacing advance in favour of correcting his little note. Finally, as if tiring of being ignored, Jack rushed forwards, shouting, arms outstretched. But his intimidating yell turned to a bellow of pain as the Doctor suddenly jabbed the pencil in Jack's ear and 105

threw him over the side of the boat. Jack crashed into the grey glass of the harbour waters.

'Told you I'd have him,' said the Doctor mildly, ignoring the angry shouts and splutters floating up from the fallen man. He turned his attention to Tommo and Chongy. 'Now let her go, or you'll follow him.'

Tommo yanked Stacy back up and crooked his arm tight round her throat.

'Oh, yeah?'

'There are many people about these docks,' the Doctor reminded him calmly.

'Chances are someone's already calling the real police. Do you really want to draw attention to yourself?'

'Easy, mate,' she heard Chongy's cautioning voice behind her. 'They've got nothing on us. Nothing.'

'Oh, it's all conjecture, I agree,' smiled the Doctor. 'And the police would only hamper my investigations. So, please let my friend go. Perhaps we can reach an understanding.'

'All right,' agreed Chongy. 'Inside the cabin. We'll talk.'

'Away from any witnesses, huh?' gasped Stacy.

'We'll talk on my terms,' insisted the Doctor. 'Out here. I want you to show me what's in the van.'

'No way,' said Chongy flatly.

Tommo tightened his grip on Stacy's neck.

Scared and angry, Stacy stamped her foot down hard on Tommo's ankle.

He cried out and she elbowed him in the ribs with enough force to

send him staggering back – just as the Doctor darted forwards and hit him in the solar plexus. He doubled up and collapsed on to the deck.

Rubbing her bruised neck, Stacy turned to see the Doctor leap over Tommo's fallen body and chase after Chongy. But the wiry man was quick on his feet, and she saw by the Doctor's agonised look back that he was worried about how she might fare if Jack recovered.

'I'm fine!' she yelled. 'Go! Go get him!'

But it was too late. Chongy was almost out of sight, disappearing past a small crowd dawdling on the dock.

'We blew it!' wailed Stacy.

106

Eighteen

Splitting hairs

The Doctor jogged back to Stacy and studied her neck.

'I'm fine,' she said hoarsely, waving him away.

'That's lucky for you – Tommo is it?' The Doctor had a look in his eyes as wild as his hair. 'Now, how do you know Daniel Basalt?' Tommo said nothing.

'Right. Hold his arms down, Stacy.'

Stacy did as she was told, knelt on each of the man's wrists. The Doctor sat on the man's chest and carefully took hold of one of the scant remaining hairs on his head. He plucked it out. Then another.

Tommo swore. 'What do you think you're doing?'

'I'm pulling out your hair,' said the Doctor calmly, selecting a particularly long one that the man must comb clear across his bald patch. He yanked it out, and held it up in front of Tommo. 'Sorry, but I'm going to keep pulling them until they've all gone – or until you tell me how you know Daniel Basalt and exactly what he's paying you to do.'

Yank. Another hair. And another. Tommo shouted in anger.

The Doctor nodded encouragingly. 'He is paying you. I take it?'

‘You’re bloody crazy,’ snarled Tommo as the Doctor plucked out yet another hair.

‘How do we contact him?’ Stacy asked. Gritting her teeth, she took a whole bunch of Tommo’s greasy hairs in her hand and pulled them out. He grimaced and gasped in pain.

‘It’s psychologically more effective to take one at a time,’ the Doctor chided.

‘We don’t have time for the subtle approach,’ Stacy reminded him.

He nodded. ‘And Tommo here doesn’t have the hair to allow us to persevere with either method for very long.’ He took hold of most of the horse’s tail that flapped weakly over the man’s pate and started playfully tugging. ‘So. . . ?’

‘No!’ Tommo moaned, like a big kid. ‘Get off my hair!’

‘Hurts, doesn’t it?’ said Stacy with feeling. ‘So tell us what we want to know.

How we can meet with Basalt.’

The Doctor pulled harder and Tommo finally broke.

‘I’ve never even met him myself. He pays us to do jobs for him,’ Tommo muttered, ‘but only Chongy can get in touch with him. Not me and Jack.’

107

The Doctor tugged on the man’s hair warningly. ‘Sounds a bit convenient to me.’

‘It’s true!’ Tommo insisted, wide-eyed. ‘We just dump stuff for him, out at sea.’

‘Stuff?’

‘Coffins, like you said.’

‘What’s inside the coffins?’ Stacy demanded.

‘Chongy takes care of that. I don’t know what we’re dropping off and I don’t want to know.’ He shuddered and writhed against their combined grip. ‘What do I care what’s in those things? He pays well

enough, that's all that matters.'

Stacy wriggled her knees against Tommo's wrists. 'How many have you taken care of for Basalt?'

'Seven? Eight?'

The Doctor pulled feverishly at the man's hair. 'When?'

'I don't know!' Tommo winced and fell limp. 'I can't remember the dates, and we don't keep records. He's paid us for eight trips. That was going to be the ninth.'

'I see.' The Doctor nodded, and rummaged in his pocket. He pulled out two crisp fifty-pound notes, rolled them up and poked them behind Tommo's ear.

'Thanks for the information.'

Tommo and Stacy both stared at him as if he were nuts.

He shrugged. 'When Basalt hears from Chongy what happened here, I doubt he'll be using you for any more late night dumping runs.' The Doctor smiled down on Tommo. 'Think of it as compensation.'

'A hundred quid?' Tommo said despondently.

'Goodness no!' The Doctor tutted at him. 'Half of that's for poor soggy Jack.'

Stacy shook her head disbelievingly. She could hear clomping footsteps getting louder. 'Speaking of whom. . .'

'Time to leave, I suppose.' The Doctor slapped Tommo's cheek affectionately. 'Goodbye. If I were you, I'd shave it all off anyway. And take an extended holiday somewhere far from here.'

'All right, let him go.' Jack, looking like the proverbial drowned rat, staggered along the length of the boat towards them.

Stacy and the Doctor rose as one. Jack looked furious, fists clenched. Trailing behind him was a small, ugly crowd clearly out for trouble. Stacy looked worriedly at the Doctor.

'Just the day for a bracing dip, wouldn't you say?' he said cheerily. And before Stacy could argue he had lifted her up and thrown her overboard.

She had just time to fill her lungs with air before she hit the grey murk of the water. Skin stinging with the impact she dived down and swum for as 108

long as she could underwater before resurfacing to get her bearings beside a rusting red tugboat.

The Doctor was treading water beside her, an appalled look on his face.

‘Gosh, it’s no wonder Jack was so annoyed. It’s freezing in here!’

Stacy nodded and hoped her smile was as cold as she felt. ‘I’m empathising with him, Doctor. Really I am.’

With that she started kicking her legs and swimming for the shore, the shouts and yells of the angry men on the Prometheus mingling with the gulls’

laughter high above.

Moving quickly in case Jack’s lynch mob planned to pursue them further, or in case someone passing by had decided to trouble the police, Stacy and the Doctor hot-footed it down the road from the dock. At least by swimming for it they’d saved themselves a ten-minute walk.

‘So are you going to slip me a couple of thirties as compensation for throw-ing me in the drink?’ Stacy growled, gasping for breath now as they kept up the pace.

‘I would if thirty-pound notes were legal tender,’ the Doctor assured her.

‘Oh. They’re not?’ Stacy blushed. ‘Your money’s all way too confusing over here.’

‘Hmm.’ He pressed a slimy wet paper ball in her hand. ‘Would you settle for a couple of twenties?’

Stacy tossed the gift over her shoulder. ‘I’m not so cheap.’

The Doctor motioned for her to stop running, leaning forward on his legs while he got his breath back. He gestured ahead. ‘Surprise. The van’s gone.’

‘Chongy, right?’ panted Stacy. ‘No van. No coffin. No evidence.’ She

swore.

‘Can’t we just get the police to collar those creeps on the boat and –’

‘The police are quite powerless to help in this situation,’ the Doctor told her.

‘Well then, we can keep watch on the *Prometheus*! Wait till Basalt comes back to beat up on them for spilling their guts.’

‘I don’t think he’ll risk coming back here. He doesn’t know how much we know.’

Stacy gave a sullen laugh. ‘Fat zero.’

‘Like I say, Basalt doesn’t know that.’ The Doctor took her chin gently between the fingers and thumb of his left hand. ‘Stacy, we’ll find the answers you’re after. I promise we will.’ He smiled sadly, felt inside his waistcoat and produced a pocket watch. ‘We have to, you see.’ The silver casing peed water over him as he flipped it open. ‘Goodness, me, is that the date? We have an urgent appointment.’

‘We do?’

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‘We do. With this evening.’ He looked at her searchingly. ‘You had no plans for this afternoon did you?’

She shrugged, shook her head.

‘I bet you wouldn’t mind if you missed out on it all together, hmm? Come on, to the beach,’ he said, jogging off once again. ‘I have something to show you in my big blue beach hut.’

Her mind brimming with possibilities at once awful and exciting. Stacy set off after him.

Anji kept imagining she could hear the raucous engines of the TARDIS all day.

Wishful thinking.

It was now six o’clock in the evening. Guy hadn’t risen till after midday, but once up and about he’d acted almost professionally normal, as if absolutely nothing at all had happened last night. Anji was reminded more profoundly than anything Fitz’s video could’ve

shown her just what a rotten actress she was.

And what a coward, too. She'd hidden away in her room, flicked through magazines, listened to the radio, watched TV, but was too antsy to settle with anything. At last she knocked on the door to her spare room, where Guy was languishing.

'Yeah?'

'Can I come in?'

'I'm decent.'

She opened the door. He was sat on the bed, holding his mobile.

'Yes, you are,' she said.

'Huh?'

'Decent. You're all right, Guy.' Anji sighed. 'Look – I know I'm a walking cliché but. . . I'm sorry for last night.'

Guy looked down at his feet. 'Nothing to be sorry about. We were just a bit wrecked. Forget it.'

'It was ages ago. Since Dave. . . you know. But I guess seeing all this "loved one" stuff you're going through has brought a few feelings back to the surface.'

Guy nodded. 'Shame the Doctor hasn't got some magic lotion to fix that.'

'Fix what?'

Anji spun round in surprise, blushing. The Doctor was standing just behind her, peering curiously in at Guy through the open door. A woman stood behind him, late thirties, hands on hips, plenty of attitude and straggly strawberry-blonde hair. Her grey eyes looked slightly wild.

'Hey,' she said, looking Anji up and down. 'I'm Stacy Phillips. You look centred. You're used to his TARDIS thing, right?'

'Right,' she answered, with a sympathetic smile. 'Anji Kapoor.' She held out a hand to the woman, which was firmly taken, then turned to

the Doctor.

‘You’ve been ages,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Everything OK now? Reality back on course?’

‘So it seems. I’m just not sure what it’s on course for,’ the Doctor said quietly.

‘Hi, Guy. Anyone tried to kill you lately?’

Guy considered. ‘Only my boss again,’ he said with studied nonchalance.

‘Oh, and my mum, too.’

‘What?’ Stacy’s face had softened in a moment, and Anji could see from the well-scored lines of concern there that this woman was a born carer, a listener.

‘Guy, I’m Stacy. How’d you get caught up in all this?’

As Guy opened his mouth to speak and Stacy moved through to join him in the guest room, Anji pulled the Doctor out towards the kitchen. ‘Where did you find her?’

‘Amazing what you can pick up beside the seaside,’ said the Doctor, a far-away look in his eyes.

There was a rat-a-tat-tat on the front door. Anji gave him a look. ‘Tell me that’s not a whole beach party you brought along.’

The Doctor checked his pocket watch. ‘Right on time.’

Anji crossed to the hall. ‘Who’s there?’

‘Ralf and Susan Canonschire,’ came Fitz’s deadpan voice. She opened the door and he nearly knocked her over as he grabbed her close in a big hug.

‘Anji! I’ve really missed you!’

‘You’ve only been gone a day,’ she spluttered, trying to break free of his clumsy embrace.

Trix gave her a put-down look to say she knew nothing. ‘Haven’t you told her, Doctor?’

‘I thought I’d save the catching-ups until we were all here,’ the Doctor announced. He leant in towards Fitz and Trix, put an arm round their shoulders.

‘Mission accomplished?’

Trix and Fitz glanced at each other and nodded. The Doctor smiled. ‘I now pronounce you both clever-clogs.’

‘Well, we’re all here, Doctor,’ Anji said quickly. ‘And we all have stuff to say, so. . .’

He nodded. ‘Guy, Stacy, could you join us for a meeting of minds please?’

The two of them emerged, Guy with a polite nod of his head to Trix and Fitz, Stacy curious but wary. Fresh, impatient introductions were made. Everyone wanted to get to the point.

People found places to perch around the living room, and Anji looked the Doctor right in the eye.

‘Well?’

111

Nineteen

Storytelling

The Doctor told them, right there and then and without ceremony.

He explained about the mists and his unplanned arrival in Newhaven at night, his near-death in the sea, and how Stacy had saved him.

Then he helped Stacy recount her own story, interrupting and embellishing, the born raconteur who can’t bear someone murdering a story he can tell better.

As Anji listened, she shuddered to hear of these mysterious non-murders of Daniel Basalt and his video nasties.

‘So, you’ve met the man too,’ Trix observed, acknowledging Stacy for the first time since their cool hello. ‘Bad to the bone, isn’t he?’

Stacy unfolded herself from a spidery heap by the TV and stared. ‘You’ve seen him? Recently?’

‘Sure.’

She half rose. ‘You know where to find him?’

‘We know his haunts,’ Trix said casually.

‘Later,’ said the Doctor, holding up a hand.

But Fitz was unable to contain himself. ‘I followed him to Bournemouth and back, just five days ago. Saw him kill a woman.’ He crossed the room and slumped beside Stacy, clearly haunted by the memory. ‘You’re right. No special effects there.’

Anji saw Guy raise his eyebrows at her gravely and she nodded. ‘God, Fitz,’

she muttered. ‘That must’ve been awful.’

‘And not too great for the victim.’ Stacy looked coldly between Fitz and Trix.

‘Didn’t you even try to stop him?’

‘There was nothing I could do,’ Fitz protested. ‘In any case. . .

half an

hour later she came out absolutely fine. The same woman. Like nothing had happened.’

Anji saw Guy give him a doubtful look, and Fitz got cross. ‘Look, it’s true. It was the same woman. . . there just wasn’t a mark on her. She made out that no one had called round, that nothing was wrong. . .’

‘Denying all connection, like the people I’ve been hounding. . .’ Stacy was wringing her hands in frustration. Her eyes flashed at Fitz. ‘But you saw the 113

murder happen. You *let* it happen.’

Fitz looked hurt. ‘I was too late to. . . Look, the Doctor told me not to get involved.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Stacy’s face had darkened. She looked at the Doctor accusingly.

‘And why would –’

‘I didn’t know anything of your own experiences with the man then,’ he said gruffly. ‘Nor what he was really capable of. And we *still* don’t. We’re not seeing the big picture, what he’s trying to achieve’

‘Achieve? He’s killing people, what more –’

‘Not now, Stacy!’ he bellowed. She flinched like he’d slapped her face, and fell quiet. In the same breath he told Fitz, ‘You did well. Don’t worry.’

Fitz nodded, grateful and relieved.

The Doctor continued as if nothing had interrupted him, moving on to events down at the docks that morning. While Trix sat filing her nails like none of this concerned her, he briefly detailed his escapades with the hoods on the boat and how Stacy had seen what he literally couldn’t: a white, rusty van.

‘It was a crappy white van that pulled up outside the woman’s house,’ Fitz breathed. ‘They brought out these bin bags full of. . . God knows what, and put them in the back.’ He shuddered. ‘I thought it was bits of her body.’

‘There was a kind of coffin in the back of this van,’ said Stacy slowly. ‘But I don’t think there was a corpse inside.’

Anji frowned. ‘Why?’

‘It was full of air holes – like whatever was inside it was alive, like it needed to breathe. And these metal bands were all round it to keep it safely inside.’

Guy jumped up. ‘You’re joking!’ he spluttered.

Everyone stared at him. Guy looked suddenly self-conscious, and sat back down.

‘What is it?’ the Doctor asked, with sudden concern.

‘Well. . . That coffin you’ve described. It sounds textbook design for burial at sea.’

The Doctor leaped into the air. ‘Eureka!’

Encouraged, Guy went on. ‘The air holes are so the coffin fills with water and sinks quickly – if it’s allowed to drift it can end up resurfacing somewhere else. The metal bands hold the lid on and stop

the body floating out. Sometimes the currents can –'

'The biodegradable padding!' Stacy and the Doctor both exclaimed, as if the meaning of life had become suddenly clear.

'Yeah! They use that!' Guy nodded enthusiastically. 'Soaks up those tricky bodily fluids. The body can't be embalmed – that would be a pollutant. We've got strict rules on that sort of thing.'

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'Rules?' Trix looked up from her nails, apparently irritated. 'How do you know all this anyway?'

'Burial at sea is handled by my office, the Sea Fisheries Inspect. . . ' Guy trailed off. He and Anji looked at each other. 'So this is why Mike tried to kill me? He's connected with people disposing of bodies, and he thought I knew something about it?'

'Looks like it,' the Doctor agreed. 'Though his malice towards you was heightened by some as yet unidentified –'

Guy shushed him, much to the Doctor's consternation. 'Anji, back the office you asked me about FEPA. . . '

Fitz held up a hand. 'Translation?'

'Food and Environment Protection Act,' Guy told him. 'A FEPA licence is needed before anything can be dumped in the sea. Including coffins.'

'I saw a spreadsheet on Mike's computer,' breathed Anji, 'in a folder called FEPA. Didn't make sense at the time.'

It detailed cargo deliveries from

Newhaven, but with no destination marked.'

'Because that was their destination.' Guy nodded. 'And so each "cargo" would need a FEPA licence.'

Trix snorted. 'We're talking about crooks and murderers dumping bodies off the side of the boat. No vicar, no ceremonies – you think they'd be bothered about the proper paperwork?'

'But they'd be bothered if the bodies of their victims came floating

back up again, wouldn't they?' Guy shrugged. 'It can happen. Go through the SFI and even if they do, the bodies are accounted for. They must be paying Mike a bung to set it all up. Who'll know there was never an actual ceremony? It's all legal, all covered.'

'They certainly wouldn't want any undue attention,' the Doctor agreed, 'particularly when these "dead" people seem all to be very much alive. . . '

'And in on the scam, if they're like the woman Fitz met.' Stacy nodded. 'Jeez, Tommo said they'd taken care of eight or nine of these jobs for Basalt, and I'm sure there've been more. . . '

'How many sea burials can there be in an average year?' wondered Fitz.

Guy shook his head. 'Regulations say we should allow no more than thirty.'

'There were about fifty "deliveries" on that spreadsheet.' Anji said slowly.

She pulled a face. 'And it's only August.'

'What form does the licence take, Guy?' asked the Doctor.

'Usually an official letter to a funeral director, or the business that's going to *do* the business.' Guy was clicking his tongue now almost dementedly as he concentrated. 'It contains the name of the stiff, date and location of the proposed burial. . . All that stuff.'

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'So that information could be in those letters I saw in the FEPA folder!' Anji realised. 'We could find out the names of his victims!'

'They'll be fake names,' said Trix dismissively. 'Why leave evidence?'

Guy shrugged. 'It might be worth checking.'

'The important thing,' said Stacy, 'is to stop this happening again.'

'I just wish I knew how all this business tied in with what's been happening to me,' Guy sighed.

Anji patted his hand and looked enquiringly at the Doctor.

‘These special coffins must be manufactured to exacting specifications, Guy, am I right?’ he asked, deftly changing the subject.

‘Sure.’ He nodded. ‘Needs a softwood liner, a heavy material like iron or concrete built in to –’

Stacy butted in: ‘Can we find out which companies manufacture these things? See if any of them have received any bulk orders from a guy called Chongy?’

‘Worth a try,’ agreed the Doctor brightly.

‘Er, excuse me,’ said Trix sullenly.

Everyone turned and looked at her.

‘When is it our turn?’ She gestured at Fitz. ‘Is no one interested in what Fitz and I have been doing for the past six weeks?’

Anji felt her toes curl in the awkward silence. It stretched on as everyone stared at Trix in a sort of shocked surprise.

‘You’re getting so worked up about rules and paperwork,’ she complained as she gazed stonily about the room, a look unsettlingly at odds with her melodramatic tone. ‘You’re missing what’s important. Me and Fitz have put our lives on total hold for well over a month, we’ve risked our necks and God knows what else to get close to these people! It wasn’t easy, it was damned scary and it was six bloody weeks! And you’re all fussing on about coffins!’

‘Perhaps we should arrange a small award ceremony,’ suggested the Doctor, apparently sincere. ‘Anji, do you have anything we might use as a trophy?’

‘Ha, ha,’ said Trix dryly. ‘Fitz, back me up here. What’s important –’

‘Look, love, you’re still a bit new to this game.’ Fitz gave her a sympathetic smile. ‘Sure, we took risks, we made sacrifices, but so does everyone in our field. . . .’ Now he grinned heroically at Stacy. ‘It just comes with the territory.’

Anji started to giggle at the utterly bemused look on Stacy’s face. ‘Fitz

“Danger” Kreiner, my hero,’ she said, and dissolved into laughter. A slow smile spread over Guy’s face, then he started to join in. So did the Doctor.

‘What?’ Fitz protested. ‘It’s true!’

Trix wasn’t fazed by any of this. ‘If I could just make my point? Why traipse about trying to find who supplied what to whom, when we know how to reach the real villain of the piece – and we know he fancies my pants off?’ She held 116

out her hands in a ‘throw-me-a-bone-here!’ gesture. ‘We can just track him down again and I can get him to tell us everything we want to know.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Cut out the middle man, give yourselves a break from all this dreary theorising.’

The Doctor looked at her, the ghost of a smile still on his face. ‘You think he’ll simply tell you the details of this whole affair? Daniel Basalt’s a dangerous, devious, manipulative psychotic, Trix.’

‘Takes one to know one,’ muttered Anji.

Trix ignored her. She mimed wrapping something round her little finger. ‘I think I can win his trust. Get him to talk.’

‘You really don’t know the guy,’ said Stacy quietly.

‘It’s a noble gesture, Trix, but there are forces at work here I doubt even Basalt fully understands.’ The Doctor sank his hands deep into his pockets and sighed. ‘He’s being used. . . as are so many of us, it seems.’

‘I should go after him, Stacy declared. Anji noticed the Doctor give her a despairing look, as if they’d argued over this before. Stacy glared back at him defiantly. ‘He approached me, chose me to tell about all this stuff,’ she reminded him. ‘Perhaps if it’s me who confronts him –’

‘No one will tackle Basalt face to face,’ the Doctor insisted. ‘There’s still so much we don’t understand.’

‘Like this mist stuff,’ muttered Guy.

‘Yes, what’s its nature, its purpose? Why do some see it but not others. . . ?’

He nodded decisively. ‘When we act, it has to be from a position of strength.

And knowledge is strength – impartial knowledge. So I agree, Basalt should be followed. Now we’ve upset his little operation in Newhaven,

chances are he'll be looking for new muscle. We need to find out what he's really doing, how he's doing it, who his accomplices are. . . '

'Who's been ordering job lots of sinkable coffins to government specifications,' Guy added.

'Fine,' said Trix, betraying a spark of anger now. 'Do everything the hard way, why don't you?'

'Speaking of which,' said the Doctor mildly, 'I take it you did get what I asked for?'

Trix pulled out a small bundle from the pocket of her leather jacket. What looked like a Lottery ticket was wrapped round its middle; she removed it and tossed the bundle over to him. 'Six weeks undercover. . . for that.'

'A gift from elegant Boyard Towers, Streatham,' Fitz added.

'Your time wasn't wasted,' he assured them as he carefully unwrapped a syringe. He seemed transfixed by the dark dribble inside, like he was gazing into the depths of some glittering gemstone. 'This stuff is precious. With this 117

we can find the vital proof we need. Learn exactly what it is Basalt's caught up in.'

' *Se la forma scompare, la sua radice è eternal*,' said Trix suddenly. Everyone but the Doctor looked at her warily, like she'd just insulted them all, so she translated: 'If the form vanishes –'

'– its root is eternal,' finished the Doctor, still focused on the stuff in the syringe. 'Did Nencini say that?'

'Yeah.'

'You told me you didn't understand what he said.' Fitz looked at her suspiciously.

'I told you I didn't understand what he *meant*. And I still don't.' She rose sulkily. 'I'm going for a breath of fresh air.' With that, she got up and left the flat, closing the door firmly behind her.

'What's her problem?' Guy wondered.

'I've made extensive notes, if you're interested,' Fitz offered. 'My expedition to Siberia was a breeze next to six weeks being married to

her.'

'Married?' Anji raised an eyebrow. 'Maybe we should've got round to Trix's story faster.'

'You two are married?' Stacy looked confused.

'No, no,' Fitz said hurriedly. 'Well, we were, sort of, but now I'm a free agent.'

'Are you?' The Doctor slammed his fist down on Anji's kitchen worktop.

Everyone jumped. 'I wonder if any of us are.'

118

Twenty

Psychokiller

Daniel Basalt woke and couldn't remember quite where he was.

Someone was in bed beside him.

He relaxed as he realised it was only that dumb bitch Jacqui, snoring softly.

A chink of sunlight through the curtains fell across her beak of a nose and cast an impressive shark-fin shadow over his chest.

He wondered, looking at her peaceful, stupid face, if she went to sleep dreaming he'd kill her before morning. He'd slept beside her enough times to recognise the way she held herself tense at first, barely daring to breathe, like a naughty child who believes her parents won't see her hiding in the bed if she keeps very still and quiet. But really the child *wants* to be found. Wants acceptance and to be held. That childlike desire never disappeared: except in Jacqui's case perhaps she wished to be held tight around the neck, or have lips pressed up hard against her mouth.

Basalt recalled early years spent sneaking into the beds of strangers once his parents were dead, looking for warmth, to be held. Getting kicked and beaten, hauled off to correction facilities and care workers. Or shrinks, as he got older, as it went on. They would always seek excuses for his violence and attitude in his past. That was OK; he could play that game, gain sympathy that way.

How many times had he trotted out the story of the lady at the orphanage who'd told him, 'We can't control loss in this life, Danny. People lose things all the time, and sometimes it seems there's no reason. . . but it's just fate.'

Yeah, people genuinely thought that was a key defining moment in the life of Daniel Basalt: his parents dead in a car crash, taken away by a cruel accident of fate, little Danny can't accept we have no control over who takes away the things that are precious in life. So *he* starts taking – well, someone's got to, right? Someone's gotta take responsibility if God won't step in with a big, stupid sandaled foot. Yeah, there's little Danny out on the street taking.

Money. Jewellery. Bites out of people.

Bullshit story. It wasn't even the orphanage woman who'd said that to him, for one thing. It was some cop, or someone's dad, a big friendly bear of a man, sat beside him on a low wall on a leafy street with no sidewalks. Weird 119

how the memory stayed with him, no matter how deep he tried to bury it.

What was strange was that so many people were ready to forgive even the worst shit you did. You just fed them some lines and they found excuses for you. Weak. They tried to make out that you were weak, a victim of your own screw-ups. Couldn't bear to admit you were really the predator. That you'd taken charge, that you were brave enough to take what you wanted because you weren't prepared to leave it to 'fate'.

He had a headache. Damned sun was too hot, the room was getting like an oven. He could smell his own sweat. He never stopped sweating, but really that was because he was brave. Bravery meant doing stuff, even when you were scared. And when you were scared, you sweated. Everyone knew.

Jesus, who needed a shrink?

Jacqui stirred a little in her sleep, turned her face with its silly, secret smile towards him. He made her feel 'deliciously weak', that's what she'd told him.

She hadn't needed to. From the moment he saw her, he'd known. He'd come to recognise the type.

This headache was bad, right behind his eyes. Clearly he was thinking too much. That didn't help anything. He necked some pills with stale water from last night. Pain had to be controlled like everything else. Especially pain.

Angrily he slapped Jacqui's cheek with the back of his hand. She jumped, cried out in pain, and he kicked her out of bed. She caught her shoulder on the corner of her bedside table as she fell, and it crashed down on top of her.

'Sorry, Daniel,' she shouted as she struggled out from under the debris, a wild look in her big eyes. 'I'm sorry, really I am.'

He stared at her. 'Just fix me some breakfast.'

Once he'd dressed and eaten, Basalt pushed away his empty plate and Jacqui took it to the sink without a word. She was sulking, but he guessed secretly she was thrilled by the drama of it. Her fall had left her with a livid red welt on her arm. She would wear it like a medal around the other girls, he just knew.

'I'm going out,' he announced.

Jacqui tried to act casual but he heard her voice shake. 'When will you be back?'

'Tonight.' He paused. 'Unless I find someone better, which won't be hard.'

Jacqui nodded, her eyes downcast. 'I'll cook something special.'

'Don't. I'd sooner eat alone.' He got up and walked heavily across the room to check how he looked in the mirror. Straightened his tie. He'd do. 'Just be in bed waiting.'

She nodded again, and he trotted out of her smart apartment. He'd spent too much time round here lately; after tonight he should seek out someone 120

new. Life got so flat if you kept at the same thing. And that just wasn't him any more.

Not since Erasmus and the girl came to him, anyhow.

Nineteen down. Nencini was the last. The deal had been for twenty – then he would be free for his spree. And the Canonshires would off the Italian guy any time now. They seemed kosher, and keen enough; he should maybe call and chase them up. Normally, people couldn't wait to set the date.

Yeah. Nencini would be dead any time now.

He'd thought of killing the Italian himself, but he wanted the couple's cash, and he'd already offed the old lady. He wanted enough cash to have the biggest goodbye blast this world had ever seen. Then Erasmus would take him away somewhere he'd never be found. He could forget everything. Have everything. Want for nothing.

Not even Stacy.

Such a shame about Stacy. . .

He smiled. Neither Erasmus nor the girl knew he'd been in touch with her.

Of course they didn't.

Daniel Basalt was in control, whatever anyone else thought.

Not long after he set off for Fulham, his cellphone rang.

‘Yes.’

Basalt, it’s Chongy here.’

‘Why are you calling?’

‘*Prometheus* is blown. Tommo and Jack can’t dump the woman now, we had snoopers round.’

‘Police?’

‘I don’t think so. Man and a woman. They could handle themselves.’

Basalt pulled the Porsche straight over into a bus lane and switched off the engine. ‘Where is the body now?’

‘In the van. We have to get rid of it.’

‘I thought Timeless was paying you for that service, Mr Chong.’

‘We need to meet. I can get you someone else, sure –’

‘You’ve been careless. I want approval of anyone new.’ He was the boss, of course he had to have approval. ‘Jesus, Chong, there’s only two of these left to do. All right. I’ll meet you at the warehouse, at five.’

He killed the call and swore. Why did this have to happen now, just as he was about to meet Erasmus? He could keep quiet about it, but if that little blonde freak happened to touch him she would know the truth all right. And he couldn’t afford to upset them now.

Then again, perhaps she would be out on her own again. He’d taken her back home to Erasmus just yesterday, once he’d picked her up outside the dark 121

girl’s place. The man had shouted and scolded but what did he expect? He offered the kid no discipline, no real control. Something could happen to her.

And it wasn’t allowed to, not before she’d fixed things for him.

He shuddered. Chloe wasn’t scared of him, little freak bitch. She knew

him, she said, sounding just like the shrinks and the doctors. She didn't know jack except he was hot for diamonds, like she was. That's why she'd come to him in the first place. And because he got things done. But she always looked at him with a sneer, all snooty, like she was so superior.

Basalt wondered if it was a different story at night. If Chloe ever snuck into Erasmus's bed those nights when the moon hangs like a skull waiting to snap down and crush you. If she hoped to be held the way all kids did, and whether Erasmus ever let her nuzzle up close or just pushed her away, left her on her own.

He turned on the stereo. Its thud and blare shook the car.

What kind of a freakin' name was Erasmus anyway?

'Why have things gone wrong with the clearing up?'

Erasmus sounded petulant, like a child who's been promised a trip to the beach but then it rains. His broad brow was creased with worry, his blue eyes dull and glassy. 'I hate talking about all this.'

'I can't even think about it,' Chloe chimed from the other side of the room, sat beside that stupid black animal with her doll. What was she even doing in the room when they talked about stuff like this?

Maybe she just liked the view. Erasmus's base of operations, the Timeless suite of offices, boasted an incredible boardroom – one big, long, wood-floored space with large, circular windows that showed views you shouldn't be able to see, views that changed every time Basalt came here. The door on the street outside was plain and green – about the only green thing along the whole of Fulham Palace Road. But once you came up the stairs everything was different. If you believed your eyes there was a forest outside. Or a castle.

Or some country scene like a dusty old British painting, or something out of a science-fiction flick.

'Different worlds, but all the same,' Chloe had said the first time he'd realised how screwed-up the windows were. Like that explained anything. He'd felt stupid. Scared and helpless. He'd never wanted to kill her more than in that moment.

Now he understood a little more it wasn't so bad. They'd forced him to accept – take for granted, even – that this crazy stuff was for real, real as the money they were giving him and the dreams they were

bringing true. It was easy to believe, in a way. It proved that good things never come to those who wait – only those who take.

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Today the view seemed much like that you'd expect from an office window round here: grimy buildings, ratty pigeons weathering a shower of rain, bored employees smoking out of stained windows. Maybe the trick wasn't working today.

'Daniel, this worries me, it really does.' Erasmus bit his lip. His doughy features were pressed into a deeper frown than ever. 'Is the money we're giving you not enough?'

'I'll need more,' he said automatically, thinking of the spree waiting for him. 'With more cash I can fix everything. Someone got suspicious about the dumping, is all.'

'How? You promised you would be careful. Neat and careful, with no mess and no fuss.'

Basalt fought to keep the irritation from his voice. 'I'm making new arrangements this afternoon, meeting the man at five in my own offices. Why don't you join us, Erasmus? Set your mind at rest, and leave me to worry about these last messy details.'

'I suppose we could come,' said Erasmus slowly. 'But we'll come after you've dealt with this man, tomorrow morning. And you can tell us. We don't want to meet people like him.'

'No, we don't,' said Chloe, with a shudder. 'We hate people like him.'

'Like me, you mean,' said Basalt. 'So give me the stones and I'm out of here.'

Erasmus looked over at Chloe. 'How many money-diamonds do we have left for Daniel?'

The girl sighed.

'What's the matter?'

'Jamais has tummy-ache. He's got too much mist in his stomach.'

Erasmus pondered this. 'He'll be all right,' he said brightly. 'He just wants a rest.'

‘He’s not well.’

‘Chloe, how many diamonds?’

She sighed. ‘Not many.’

‘You’re sitting on piles of them,’ Basalt retorted. He’d barged in on the girl’s room once. She’d nearly freaked.

‘Those aren’t money-diamonds.’ Chloe’s funny eyes narrowed to slits. ‘I keep one for everyone we’ve helped. I can name the person who gave me every one of those diamonds,’ she said proudly.

‘But what about the ones we pay with?’ said Erasmus patiently. ‘How many of the leftovers?’

There were a number of large circular recessions set into the far wall. Chloe crossed to one and it glowed with a pale light. Behind it, as if the wall had turned translucent, was a small pouch.

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Basalt’s mouth started to water when he saw how stuffed it looked. Chloe dealt him out a casual handful.

‘More,’ he whispered, his shirt wet and cold under his arms.

‘No more,’ she said quietly but firmly. She was watching Basalt closely. He suddenly had the image of himself as a boy, burning beetles with the sun through a magnifying glass, guessing which way they would try to turn.

It had been a slow drag on the freeway down south. Now Basalt was swinging the Porsche round the last half-dozen B-roads to reach the warehouse.

The sun was glowering through dark clouds as he pulled up at his offices, part of a long-abandoned industrial unit that sat between the River Colne and an overgrown stretch of the Grand Union Canal. But it was a useful and isolated venue for conducting business. Chong’s rusting white van was already parked by the entrance.

The door was slightly ajar. Chong, perhaps bored with waiting, had broken into the building.

Basalt stormed up to the entrance and kicked the door wide open. The warehouse was dark and shadowy. ‘Chong,’ he called, hitting the

lights. An age seemed to pass as they buzzed in the blackness, warming up. 'Where are you?'

'Basalt.' It was Chong's voice, hoarse and oddly muffled.

Then the lights snapped on at last.

Basalt blinked in disbelief.

Two men in ape suits stood about ten paces away, pointing guns at him, each sporting an old-fashioned, braided military jacket. No. Those weren't ape suits. He caught their animal stench, could see the dark intelligence in their bestial eyes. The apes were for real.

'What in the name of Christ is this?' Basalt nearly choked. 'Chong?'

'It's not the work of your Mr Chong, I can assure you.' The loud, authoritative voice rolled round the warehouse walls, and a well-built man in a greatcoat stepped out from the shadows that cloaked the back of the building.

He held Chong as easily as the freak girl held her little doll, twisting his arm up behind his back.

'He broke in,' gasped Chong, clearly in pain. 'Says he's taking over from here.'

The huge man laughed. 'He's right, I'm afraid. But please don't shoot the messenger. That's our job.'

Chong was thrown to the dusty floor. One of the apes turned and fired.

Chong screamed as his knee was scattered bloodily over the grimy floor, stared in panic at the debris, and apparently fainted dead away.

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'By way of demonstration.' The big man strolled towards Basalt. 'I trust you appreciate now we mean serious business?'

Basalt pulled at his stiff shirt collar and glanced back at the master light switch. 'And just what is your business, Mr. . . ?'

'My name is Sabbath. And please, don't imagine that turning out the lights will help you escape. There's the most atrocious stench about you, Mr Basalt.'

My apes will find and kill you just as easily in the dark.'

'Is that so?'

'Listen to me, Mr Basalt. You're meeting shortly a man called Erasmus and his ward, a child named Chloe. Am I right?'

Basalt said nothing. Sabbath removed a pistol from a shoulder holster under his coat and took over-elaborate aim at Basalt's groin.

'Tomorrow morning,' he said.

Sabbath smiled. 'I should very much like to attend.'

Basalt eyed him coldly. 'Trying to take over what I've set up, is that it?'

'My dear Mr Basalt,' said Sabbath, 'I'm not interested in taking over anything. As a business, I fear Timeless literally has nowhere to go.'

'So why are you here?'

'Simply to sequester its assets.'

'By what right?'

Sabbath smiled almost sadly at the pistol pinched in his huge hand. 'The only right that matters, Mr Basalt: I'm holding the gun.'

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Twenty-one

Things change

Around lunchtime, Chloe wants to go back to the start of the universe. She thinks this might cheer up Jamais who is still not himself.

The two of them sit slumped against the mountain of diamonds in Chloe's special room. Jamais's nose is hot and dry and crusty. Chloe licks her finger and wipes it against the shiny skin but it does no good. His eyes look glassy and clouded. Like the mist in his belly is finding its way out.

'Oh, Jamais,' Chloe whispers helplessly. 'Tell me you'll be all right.'

Jamais says nothing, of course, but bravely presses his smooth head

against her hand.

‘If only we could find your home,’ she sighs. ‘Find others like you, who might know what to do. But your home’s gone, like mine. Like Erasmus’s.’

Like so many homes have gone, she thinks. The myriad rivers they used to cross have run dry. Maybe Jamais is sick because the voids he has crossed so many times are collapsing down, dwindling out. How can he exercise, how can he run, if he has nowhere to go but this tiny universe? He will get fat. She thinks of him as a big fat lump and smiles. Jamais tries to smile too, seeing that she is happy.

‘I wish Mum was here,’ whispers Chloe.

Jamais closes his eyes and seems to nod. It’s like someone invisible is stroking him, soothing him. Easing his pain.

She thinks of the book. This morning she saw a picture of someone who looks a little like D’Amantine, the thief from St Raphael. She knows who that is. But beyond that point, the page won’t turn. She knows there is something marked there that doesn’t want to be read.

She can’t help but picture the design on the front of the book: an arrangement of interlocking triangles. The pattern glows and burns red in her mind.

Its sharp points want to poke out her strange eyes.

‘Let’s go back to the start,’ Chloe whispers, with a shiver. ‘Where no one can find us.’

Her heart sinks as she sees Jamais struggle up arthritically, readying himself to go back. Normally he would be bounding playfully about, but not now.

Chloe wishes her friend were well again.

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For her, he rallies.

Jamais breathes in and out, slowly at first then in swift, panting breaths; his body is an engine, the ancient molecules of the air all around his fuel. She grips his collar and laughs wildly as she feels him go. This is the old Jamais, who’s always young and full of fun and

who can devour the distances of deep time like snack-treats.

And they get there, at the start of the universe, but it's been too much.

Jamais coughs and his dark, glossy legs splay beneath him. As Chloe hovers in the void Jamais closes his eyes and floats slowly up and past her, a big black balloon. She tugs him by his tail, his eyes open and he stares around as if not recognising where he is or who holds him.

Then he sees it's her. He drops obediently to lie at her feet, tummy grumbling, head pushing about on the end of his long neck.

It seems no fun here any more.

Darker, like the light they've brought with them has lost its value and dimmed.

Colder, like all the heat is slipping away from Jamais.

Scarier. Like something knows they come here and is following close behind. Anticipating their actions.

And Chloe sees that bright speck that waits and waits for nothing to end and birth to begin, and she can't help but feel guilt at their silly jokes, their teasing and toying with creation. There's a feeling she has that none of their stunts will work on the giant atom this time. That it's waiting for something real.

'Can you take us away, again?' Chloe asks Jamais, suddenly scared.

Jamais takes a deep breath and chokes on it.

They're back in an instant. Home, in the ship. But Jamais looks different.

Chloe sees the grizzled white bits round his dark muzzle and the cataracts conspiring over his eyes, sees the mute incomprehension in his gentle face.

He knows time, of course, like he knows hunger and love and scratches on the head. But he knows nothing of age.

'It's going to be all right, Jamais,' she whispers, being extra-brave. But she thinks of the book again, of what might be waiting over the page and she's so scared she wants to be dead.

She runs to tell Erasmus. He doesn't want to come. But Chloe knows

how to pester and at last he agrees to look.

‘Oh dear,’ he says. ‘If the animal dies it will spoil everything.’

Chloe says nothing, she’s busy not crying.

‘We can’t get another like Jamais. His world is lost, in all the universes.’ He pauses. ‘There’re so few universes left now.’

Chloe nods, fiddles with the locket around her neck.

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Erasmus crouches beside Jamais and pats his flank. ‘Perhaps he will feel better in the morning when we all go to see your Uncle Daniel.’

She realises she’s pulling so hard on the silver chain it might break, and lets go. Erasmus stares suddenly at the locket, as if seeing it for the first time.

‘What’s that?’

‘A gift,’ she says defensively. ‘I’ve had it ages.’

She has never told Erasmus about the diamond she keeps in the locket: Sabbath’s diamond, with its funny light and tingling feeling. It’s special, her very favourite – the only one that belongs just to her, not kept as a keepsake of a grateful life. Jamais was so clever to steal it. She’s happy they stole something from Sabbath. He’s taken so much from others. So much from her life.

A Tsar’s daughter gave the locket to Chloe as a gift a hundred years ago, and Chloe has worn it with the diamond pressed inside for a hundred years.

Why should Erasmus choose this moment to notice it? He’s not generally observant; he didn’t even notice a difference when the book twisted round her eyes to teach her a lesson. He looked at her just the same, like her eyes had always been that way.

And Chloe knows suddenly with a sick certainty that this is one more sign that things are wrong and will never be right again.

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Twenty-two

Anji found it a bit weird, travelling to Florence by TARDIS. Alien planets and alternative dimensions, fine – but as she and the Doctor pushed their way through the swarm of tourists and locals crowding the Ponte Vecchio, she couldn't help thinking she should've endured a train trip to Gatwick, empty hours spent wandering packed airports, the crowded intolerance of a jumbo jet and at least a couple of surly taxi drivers before being here. Just hopping in the TARDIS and arriving in the sultry peacefulness of a sun-drenched square felt oddly like cheating. And it made her realise that exploring distant worlds throughout the cosmos was fine, but it meant so much more if you were poking about on your own doorstep. She wished she'd taken Fitz's camcorder from the TARDIS.

The Doctor paused, staring out over the dark waters of the Arno, shielding his eyes from the sun with one hand. He cut a dashing, romantic figure in his shirtsleeves, standing as still as one of the city's many statues. He would fit in well with the nymphs and satyrs and saints and martyrs that proliferated the city, lording it over their admiring visitors, mindless of the heat, beatific and cool.

'He should pass through here on his way back from his gallery,' said the Doctor. Discreetly he flashed to her the small metallic device concealed in his palm. He pressed gently on one end and a short needle stuck out from the other. 'A single bead of blood in here and we'll know the truth about Signor Nencini.'

Anji nodded. She looked round at the crowds surging past the dark wood facades of the jewellers' stores and felt suddenly conspicuous. Cameras clicked and flashbulbs whined. Trendy people swanned by, babbling into microscopic mobile phones. Tourists cooed and pointed at gold. And she and the Doctor were lying in wait for a man they didn't know, someone the Doctor thought could be not only a possible party to conspiracy to murder, but part of a threat to the entire universe.

'Why'd you send Trix off with Fitz for all that time?' Anji wondered.

'She has agendas of her own in wanting to travel with us,' the Doctor answered. 'I wanted to see if her patience would last on a job for me and not to 131

please herself.'

'A test?'

The Doctor nodded. There was something of Michelangelo's David about the haughty smugness that sometimes took his face.

'And she passed,' Anji said regretfully. 'She got what you needed.'

'As a task she seemed well suited to it, and she did very well,' said the Doctor with unseemly enthusiasm. 'With Fitz's help, of course.'

'Mmm.' Anji felt a pang of idiot jealousy. 'They seemed to get on, didn't they?'

'Here he comes,' hissed the Doctor abruptly.

Anji peered into the crowd. 'You see him?'

'No. But my eyes are misting over.' He was blinking furiously, and his eyes were watering. 'He's close by. Get ready.'

Anji nodded. 'You're right. Here he comes.' She recognised Nencini from Trix's photo, saw his grey, distinguished head bobbing through the crowds that thronged the old bridge. She pulled a guidebook from her bag, and before he could pass she stepped out in front of him.

'*Scusi, per favore*,' she said, and waved a picture of the Academia in Nencini's face. He recoiled in surprise, raised his arms.

The Doctor, eyes red and weeping, managed to stick him with the little needle. Nencini swore and snatched his hand away, glared angrily at the Doctor who gestured helplessly at the view across the bridge.

'It's all so beautiful,' he said, with a noisy sniff.

Nencini looked at them both, quite baffled. Then he turned, and went on his determined way, sucking at the spot of blood on his hand.

'That was subtle,' observed Anji dryly.

'I could barely see what I was aiming for,' muttered the Doctor, rubbing his shirtsleeve against his eyes. 'Whatever's trying to communicate with me, it seems to be growing weaker. Unable to get through.'

'That's a good thing, right?'

'Depends,' said the Doctor, 'on what it's trying to say.' The little device in his palm gave a pointed beep. 'All finished.'

Anji waited impatiently as he peered at the tiny display screen on the device.

The sky overhead was a beautiful dark blue. She wanted to just walk away and melt into the warm crowds, enjoy a summer's day without skulking about like a spy, without knowing that the fate of the whole universe could rest on your tense, could-use-a-massage shoulders. She thought again of the camcorder, compiling a series of gorgeous views in her mind. . . real life swarming over a real Earth. A happy ending to all those burnt-out worlds they'd seen trying to get back home.

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'So it's true,' the Doctor announced, dragging back her reluctant attention.

'DNA cross-referencing proves that on a genetic level the Nencini we just way-laid is identical to the Nencini back in Streatham.'

'Clones?' wondered Anji.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'One of them I think was born here, belongs here. The other I think was collected from another universe.'

'Collected?' Anji stared blankly at him. 'You mean someone's been travelling through those parallel universes just as we did? Except they took people across from one to another.'

He nodded. 'To replace them. To take up residence in ready-made lives.'

'And to create perfect murder victims. No one would miss the deceased because they'd still be walking round same as always.' Anji frowned. 'But then why not just bump off the other one straight away? Why send the other Nencini over to England to rot in a council flat before they have the poor sod murdered?'

'If the form vanishes, its root is eternal', mused the Doctor, seeming not to hear her. 'I wonder. . .'

'Maybe. . . ' Anji was still reasoning it out. 'Maybe so the likes of Daniel Basalt can take a life with no comeback, or else auction off the rights to others?'

The Doctor shrugged and slipped his little gizmo in his pocket. 'I don't know. But Chloe does.'

A shiver ran lightly down Anji's back. 'The little girl who was waiting outside. You've seen her, haven't you? You've spoken to her.'

'She spoke to me,' said the Doctor. 'As the TARDIS punched through into this universe, as I was about to lose all control. . . she came to me. Her. . .

companion, the animal, helped stabilise the TARDIS, saved all our lives.'

'An interdimensional time-travelling dog?' Anji looked at him dubiously.

'How does that work?'

He paused for a second. 'Supposing some great disaster occurred on a world with time-travel capability. Temporal fallout could contaminate other planets. It would mean certain death for almost every living thing, but against all odds. . . ' The Doctor shrugged. 'Well, he's here, isn't he? The result of exposure of living flesh to raw time, improbable as it may seem. That animal's able to consume the energy of time itself, and uses the distortion created to transcend spatio-temporal distance.'

'Gotcha,' said Anji, feeling her head start to throb. 'But even if all that's so, how did Chloe find you? Why would she even bother to help?'

'She was close by when we broke through into the fledgling universe.'

'Coincidence?'

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He ignored her. 'And she helped because she knew I would do something for her in exchange.'

Realisation dawned on Anji. 'Look after Guy?'

'The most special man in the universe,' he murmured. 'And then she came to me again.' He smiled wanly. 'In your home. Wanted more help. Told me about Basalt, how he was evil, how he had to be stopped. . . '

'But not the reasons why? Why not tell you the whole story?'

'She couldn't tell me much. It said as much in her book.'

Anji was getting exasperated. ‘What the hell is this book?’

‘Yes, that’s what I’d like to know. . . This book of hers that dictates what can and cannot be. . . Just exactly where did she find it?’ The Doctor turned and looked gloomily out over the dark stripe of the Arno, thick with reflections of the colourful flats that banked it. ‘A small girl of uncertain origin has the power to glimpse the way time and space will unfold – but in snatches, only in snatches. . . ’

‘Edits,’ breathed Anji. ‘Doctor, that could be it, couldn’t it? If this weird book carries an edited version of what’s going on. . . It’s like someone has chosen what Chloe can and can’t tell you – ordered the information and held some back completely in order to lead her – and you – to specific conclusions.’

‘And specific encounters, specific destinations.’ The Doctor nodded excitedly. ‘Bias! Editorial bias. . . She knew about Stacy before I even met her, her picture was in the book. And she knew Guy was special but she didn’t know why. . . ’

‘But why Guy?’ Anji pushed up next to him. ‘Who’s trying to guide events along?’ He opened his mouth and she got there first: ‘You don’t know yet.’

‘Chloe is a sensitive,’ said the Doctor, ‘but more than that, I believe she’s an anchor.’

‘A metaphorical one, I take it.’

‘She’s a traveller, able to flit through the dimensions like you might flit in and out of a parade of shops, right? And she’s able to link many disparate people and places together. She’s been travelling at random.’ His face darkened. ‘But suppose someone’s looked back and charted her journeys. Suppose someone’s been ensuring that the right people turn up at the right time. A force that cannot be seen to interfere directly, using her as a hook upon which they can hang certain events?’

‘OK,’ said Anji, ‘that’s a bit scary.’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘And this girl, she must have her own kind of TARDIS,’ Anji reasoned.

The Doctor looked at her worriedly. ‘Must she?’

‘Well, yours can’t be the only one in existence, can it?’

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‘I suppose not,’ said the Doctor quietly. ‘But unique or not, come on. Let’s get back to her.’

They set off along the narrow bustling streets that would lead them back to the TARDIS.

Basalt wasn’t scared, sat down now at his own meeting table. He’d readied it for Sabbath as if to do so with a chimp holding a gun to his head was a regular occurrence.

It was, he told himself, only a matter of time before he was back in control.

He would not go back to those long stupid days of wondering why things happened. If something bad happened to you, you just had to turn it round and round until it fitted in your life, like you wanted things to turn out that way all along.

The appearance of Sabbath was unexpected, as was his talk of a takeover bid. But he’d thought things through and decided that these details were irrelevancies to the simple truth – he was going to get out of here, and Erasmus and Chloe were going to disappear him whether they wanted to or not. They were soft, strange, impractical people, with no idea of methods. That was why they needed a guy like Basalt. He knew plenty of methods and got his way. He had a knife strapped to his wrist even now. All he needed was the right opening and he would use it.

He wasn’t scared.

‘You talk of taking assets,’ he said to Sabbath abruptly. ‘Am I one of them?’

‘You?’ Sabbath snorted. ‘A transparent hoodlum?’

‘I make stuff happen.’

‘Ah.’ Sabbath seemed amused. ‘You wish to join my employ?’

‘I just want to know why I’m not dead yet.’

‘I don’t underestimate my opponents. Especially those versed in the time lores. Those whose number I thought all but wiped out.’

Sabbath's frame was squeezed into the chair opposite, and he shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

'No, Erasmus and the child, and her animal I dare say, are coming here for a meeting with you, Mr Basalt. You shall greet them. You shall make sure they are seated at your table and put at their ease.'

'And then you take them, right?' Basalt eyed the two guns pointed at his head. 'So what happens to me?'

Sabbath seemed to choose his words carefully. 'Do as I say and I don't have to harm you.'

'Oh yeah?'

'You've not seen the child's book, I take it.'

'I've seen it. So?'

'It's a history, Mr Basalt. And an almanac of sorts.'

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Basalt stared at him in disbelief. 'You trying to tell me that little freak child knows the future?'

Sabbath considered. 'She knows of it, right enough.'

'Well if she's got a book that tells the future, why's she going to come walking straight into your trap?'

Sabbath laughed good-humouredly. 'The child holds the book, Mr Basalt. . .

but certain embellishments and omissions were made by the publishers at my behest.'

'You're crazy,' muttered Basalt. *Crazy people don't matter I'll get past you, one way or another.*

'This isn't a good day for you, is it?' Sabbath slapped a massive hand down on Basalt's shoulder. 'But you should be of good cheer, man. The future is looking bright indeed. Blindingly bright.'

A sudden groaning noise across the wide space signalled Chong's unhappy return to the land of the living.

‘Kalicum!’ Sabbath called.

A few minutes later, a scrawny, skinny figure came loping out from the shadows to join them. He was dressed in tight-fitting black coveralls and a lab coat as white as his skin. His forehead was high and broad, like a surfeit of brains had inflated his head. But despite the intelligence sparking in his dark eyes his expression was oddly obsequious.

‘I’ve primed the surgical transference software, Sabbath.’ Kalicum’s voice was unexpectedly high. It had an edge to it like nails down a chalkboard.

‘Now all we need is the subject.’

Sabbath nodded. ‘The subject will be collected shortly.’

Kalicum’s thick red lips were pursed expectantly as if ready to receive instruction. ‘Something you’d like me to do?’

‘There’s a man in pain over there,’ said Sabbath. ‘You’re a doctor. Perhaps you’d like to take care of him.’

A smile squirmed on to Kalicum’s face. ‘Indeed so.’ He held something bright and pointed in his hand up to the glare of the bare bulb burning above the table for brief inspection. ‘I’m not sure if this is sharp enough,’ he muttered, and marched over to where Chong lay in a pool of congealed blood. He crouched over the body, blocking it from view.

Chong screamed again, louder than before, then the noise cut off.

Kalicum spun round to face them. ‘It is sharp enough!’ he said happily. Then he hooked his long fingers round Chong’s neckline and hauled him away, back into the shadows. The butchered body left a thick, bloody snail’s trail across the dirty floor.

‘Kalicum craves distraction, so do behave, won’t you? His intellect is prodi-gal, but his mind has been so trammelled by our purpose these years past. . . ’

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Sabbath tutted. ‘I believe it’s the simple barbarity of this day and age’s surgery that fascinates him so. The past is like a foreign country, I believe it’s been said. They do things differently there.’ He smiled.

‘And so they do in the future.’

‘Which is bright,’ said Basalt curtly. ‘I know. Blindingly bright.’

He wasn’t scared. He definitely wasn’t scared.

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Twenty-three

Leads

Guy shrugged off the funny looks Bill the security man was giving him, entering the building with a lift maintenance man and an old crone from the catering division at nine o’clock in the evening. His new friends’ forged ID

passes had checked out and got them on site before – whoever Trix got to provide her with this stuff, they were clearly professionals.

‘Got to fix the lifts now, mate, fourth floor, before everyone starts using them again tomorrow,’ Fitz explained when pressed by the puzzled guard.

‘And I have to make his tea,’ added Trix. ‘Very particular, he is.’

‘Is he?’ said Bill, unimpressed with her rationale. ‘No one told me about any work tonight.’

Fitz sighed noisily. ‘Call the guvnor then.’

Bill looked at his phone without much enthusiasm. ‘This time of night everyone’ll be home.’

‘And that’s where I want to be!’ said Fitz. ‘So if you could just. . . ?’

‘Fourth floor, is it?’ called Guy. ‘I’ll take them there, Bill. Don’t worry.’ He ushered his incongruous party into the lift, and breathed a sigh of relief as the doors hummed shut.

‘These days it seems I’m either cheating death or rummaging through boring files,’ sighed Guy.

‘Which do you prefer?’ Trix enquired, her clear, youthful voice at odds with her wizened appearance.

‘Is lying in bed an option?’

They soon reached the office. It looked much the same as when they'd been here yesterday. Two recent additions were a bottle of aspirin and an industrial-sized bottle of Milk of Magnesia. Guy smiled with satisfaction.

'Where do we start?' grumped Fitz.

'For coffin info. . . ' Guy looked round and eventually gestured to some box files. 'Suppliers for FEPA licence stuff should be in that lot there. I'll take the computer, see if there's anything on names to go with those licences.'

Trix looked dubiously at the pile of files. 'How come so much paper for so few burials?'

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'It's not just burials at sea that need a licence,' he said, booting up Mike's machine. 'Any organisation hoping to deposit anything in the sea or under the seabed needs one of them.'

There were five files. Fitz deliberated, then gave three to Trix and kept two for himself. She rolled her eyes but didn't complain.

Guy soon found the folder Anji had found. Yes, here were the form letters, each one on a single page within the same document. He'd flicked through the list of Basalt's alleged victims that Stacy had written out for him on the bus over here. Now he pulled it out again and checked through the names given on the deceased forms.

'No matches here,' he reported.

'It was the longest of long shots,' said Trix, leafing through wads of dull documentation. 'I'll bet he just made up the names and the addresses. Or he took them out of the phone book at random.'

'I guess that's what a lot of people would do,' said Guy, 'but Mike reckons he's cleverer than that. Thinks he's funny. I'd be surprised if he'd managed to resist getting some crap joke in there somewhere.'

Fitz shrugged. 'Maybe we should find Mike, confront him, make him talk?'

Guy sucked in a breath, shook his head with feeling. 'I'm not going near that tosser again in a hurry.' He put on a throaty voice 'When we met, it was. . .

molder.’

Fitz looked at him uncertainly.

‘I think we’ve got our fingers in enough pies right now, chasing after people and places left, right and centre.’ Trix seemed more than a little pissed off, picking through the papers with her immaculate nails. ‘The licences hardly matter much in the great scheme of things, except to prove to Stacy she’s not been fed a pack of bullshit by Basalt.’

‘Suppose so,’ said Fitz.

Trix was on a roll. ‘Know so. They’re there as a contingency, in case any of the bodies came to light. And that’s not likely to happen for years – the police might make a token stab at contacting the relatives at the bogus address, they’d fail, reach a dead end, give up. Who cares? Mike made up some fake names, funny or not. End of story. Move on.’

Guy gave a wry smile. ‘Life’s too short, huh?’ But regardless, he kept flicking through the different names, checking them against the dark scrawl of Stacy’s list.

‘We should be getting answers from Daniel Basalt,’ muttered Trix, giving up on one of the box files and cracking open another.

Fitz yawned and rubbed his eyes. ‘Wonder how Stacy’s getting on tracking him down. Shall I give her a call?’

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‘A transparent attempt to bunk off,’ complained Trix, but Guy handed Fitz his mobile with a conspiratorial grin.

The elevator heaved up from the Underground and a shrill beeping signalled the doors to open. The jostling crowd hectored Stacy along, through the barriers and out on to Holland Park Avenue. It was crowded and uncomfortable taking the subway, but less freaky than a trip by police box.

It was a little after nine-thirty, and Stacy felt she’d trekked round every private drinking club in low-down London. But by dropping the right names in the right places, just as Trix had told her to, she reckoned she’d cracked it. Basalt was due to see ‘one of his girls’ tonight. A bored rich-chick named Jacqui, a flimsy thing who hosted his parties. Stacy figured that was where she’d find him – bullying

some poor female. When she'd been trailing round New York trying to find trace of him she'd uncovered a whole bevy of down-trodden plain-Janes in posh pads dotted round the state. They were as much his victims as the others, in a way – except that he'd settled for killing just a part of them.

She soon found the address; it was one floor of a town house set back from the wide tree-lined street. Her finger wavered over the bell. She'd told the Doctor she was only going to keep tabs on Basalt. Once he looked like he'd settled in somewhere she was supposed to call the Doctor on Anji's number and he'd be with her 'in five seconds'. Then they could keep Basalt covered more effectively with some flashy gadget he had on board his TARDIS.

She guessed pretty much anywhere was a stone's throw away for him in that crazy box of tricks. But he'd told her he couldn't go back in time, of course, and stop Basalt killing anyone at all. He couldn't use the thing to put right bad stuff in the past. That would break rules, he said. Rules it was dangerous to mess with. And that was that, subject closed. The others had all looked at her like she was some sweet kid who meant well, but who didn't get the realities of the situation.

Well maybe she didn't. But she was who she was. And maybe she had to do this for herself.

Stacy rang the doorbell.

A dyspeptic minute crawled by before a mousy looking woman in a short-sleeved dress opened the door. Her make-up was slathered on thick as a brick.

'Jacqui?' Stacy enquired.

'Yes?'

'Is Daniel in?'

Jacqui's seventies porn-star eyes narrowed and she made to close the door.

'No, he's not.'

Stacy placed her foot in the doorway. 'You sure?'

‘Positive, thanks.’ The girl put a hand on her skinny hip and scowled like she meant business.

‘I’m a friend,’ said Stacy. She noticed a livid bruise on the woman’s arm.

‘And clearly Daniel’s been here not long ago. He did that to you, right?’

‘Who are you?’

‘I imagine he treats you pretty much like shit, period, am I right?’ Stacy nodded, looked at her appraisingly. ‘And let me guess, you keep thinking that you can change him, that all he needs is someone who’ll love him and thaw that black, cold heart of his.’

Jacqui’s eyes narrowed further to pasty blue slits. ‘How dare you –’

‘But you know that’s bull, honey, don’t you? Let me in. We can talk about it.’

‘Just get out of here. He’ll be back soon,’ said Jacqui. ‘He’s seeing me tonight.’

‘Lucky you. Maybe he’ll black your eye to match your arm, huh?’ Jacqui put all her weight against the door and tried to push it closed, but Stacy held firm.

‘You know deep down he’s using you and screwing with your head and really, that’s fine with you. You don’t want to change him – ’cause you’re a victim, sweetheart. That’s all.’

‘Who are you?’ Jacqui demanded.

‘Stacy Phillips,’ she snapped. ‘And you can tell him. . . ’

Jacqui’s face had turned the colour of chalk, and her eyes were twice the size they’d been a moment ago. ‘Stacy who?’

‘Phillips.’ Stacy nodded in satisfaction. ‘So he’s mentioned me, huh?’

‘You’re a liar,’ Jacqui spat at her, and finally managed to shut Stacy out.

‘You go, girl!’ whooped Stacy, banging on the door. ‘Yeah, you sure dealt with me! Now let’s see you do the same to that bastard, huh?’ She yelled through the letterbox. ‘Get him out of your life, sweetheart!’

And tell him I called, right? Stacy Phillips! We'll see who the liar is!'

She was shaking, and had to bite her lip to stop her teeth chattering. Curtains were twitching in neighbouring windows, and Stacy flashed them a finger before stalking off back on to the avenue.

'That didn't go quite as well as it could've,' she muttered to herself. But she had some consolation. Daniel would have to pass her to get into Jacqui's place.

She would see him, then.

Her phone kicked in her pants pocket. She pulled out the trembling handset and pressed it to her ear. 'Who's this?'

'Fitz. How're you doing?'

Stacy relaxed. No magic box coming to the rescue and taking things out of her hands just yet then. 'I'm cool. Hanging outside Jacqui's place.'

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'Ah, charming Jacqui,' said Fitz. 'Any sign of Basalt?'

'Uh. . . not yet. He's due to call later, but hey, who knows?'

'Well, be careful. Stay right out of his way, OK?'

She smiled to hear his concern. He seemed a pretty sweet guy. 'How about you? Find anything?' Before he could answer Stacy-heard a babble of voices in the background. 'Hello?'

'Stop press,' Fitz reported. 'Trix has found details for two approved firms that specialise in turning out these snazzy coffins. . . '

He trailed off and Stacy could hear Trix again in the background 'Tomorrow, we can call them up, make up some official Fisheries business and find out if they've had any bulk orders in the last few months.'

'Did you catch that?' Fitz sounded close in her ear.

'Yeah, that's cool,' said Stacy.

'Looks like there's sod all else we can do tonight.'

‘How about those licences? Did they check out?’

‘Guy can’t find any link between the names you gave us and the names on Mike’s computer.’

Stacy closed her eyes. ‘Can you get a printout? I’d just like to see them for myself.’

‘Sure,’ said Fitz. ‘Meantime, I guess you’ll be calling the Doctor pretty soon, right?’

‘I guess. Goodnight, Fitz.’

‘See you later.’

Stacy glanced around the quiet neighbourhood. Night was drawing in fast and she shivered. Something about the way Jacqui had stared when she heard who’d come round to call was spooking her out. . . Maybe having the Doctor and Anji around wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all.

She called Anji’s number on her cellphone.

There was no response.

The TARDIS had landed in the concrete vault of a Fulham car park. Pale fluorescents set into the dark stained roof gave a seedy light to the lines of cars parked there. Anji looked around in dismay. ‘From the sublime to the wholly crap,’ she said sourly. ‘What are we doing here?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the Doctor, looking round cautiously. ‘I thought about what you said, about the TARDIS not being unique. And I asked her to find something she might recognise in herself.’

‘A car park?’

‘More likely something close by,’ suggested the Doctor. ‘Perhaps the old girl’s frightened. Perhaps their ship is bigger than she is.’ He paused, looked down at the oily ground. ‘She’s not met her own kind before.’

Anji felt goosepimples prickle her arms. ‘So you think your own people might be involved?’

The Doctor didn't say any more. He just started walking for the exit. When he realised his footsteps were echoing, he started walking more eccentrically, varying the pattern. Then he launched into a full blown Riverdance, the clips and clops resounding round the car park.

Typical, she thought. Deflection tactics, stopping himself from thinking about it. But suddenly the Doctor stopped dead in the middle of a *pas de basque*.

He pointed to a building across the street. An ordinary, quite dull building really, its only notable features the three large round windows on the top floor.

She trotted over to join him, to get a better look.

'No!' he yelled. He was still pointing. 'Anji, stay back. Don't you see it?'

'See what?'

'The mist. Thicker than ever.'

'I can't see a . . . ' She trailed off as she realised this cold concrete car park was starting to get as steamy as a mangrove swamp.

The Doctor screamed and clutched at his stomach like he'd been run through by an invisible sword. 'Communicate,' he gasped, falling to his knees.

'Too much power. Two time-ships, Anji, amplifying the power. And we're caught in the middle. Get back, save yourself!'

Anji reached out to support him, to help him get back to the TARDIS. The mist seemed to be all around them. And now Anji could discern darker shapes forming in the cold air. Nightmarish wraiths spun and cartwheeled past, their nebulous forms gaining depth and darkness. And from within each of the swirling shapes more and more creatures were bursting forth, spiralling outwards, masking the real world and reaching out for her.

She couldn't even see the Doctor now, nor feel the ground beneath her feet.

Time seemed to thicken and curdle; she was sinking into the stone in slow motion, the mist filling her lungs. Anji was unable to breathe or think or do anything at all except let these monsters destroy her.

Twenty-four

The breakthrough

Not even Stacy's jangling nerves could keep her awake all night. She was slumped beside a tree, half-dozing, jumping awake every time a car growled by, or some late-night party-types staggered noisily past.

Her watch said 3.15 a.m. Her ass said, *bring me a pillow you bitch*, and her body was screaming, *Jesus! Get me home to bed right now before I die*. She was great company.

Fitz, Guy and Trix would be happily asleep by now. Why hadn't she taken Fitz up on his offer of company? She'd been trying to kid herself she was such a lone wolf, that this was her affair to sort out, that Basalt had made it personal and that was the way it had to stay. But that was back when no one was listening to her crazy story. The Doctor and his odd little posse had plenty to tell that was stranger still.

And Stacy reminded herself that she'd expected the Doctor and Anji to be joining her on this stakeout. She'd tried Anji's phone practically every ten minutes – and had got the answering service every time.

Obviously they'd been delayed in Florence. Equally obviously, Basalt wasn't coming back to Jacqui tonight. Up on her floor, the bedroom light still burned in the window. It looked kind of sad. Poor, lonely victim Jacqui.

At least she's got a soft bed to lie in, her ass pointed out bitterly.

Stacy got up and bumped her butt against the tree to try to knock some feeling back into it and tried calling Anji again. 'Oh! Big surprise!'

No response.

She yawned and stretched and decided to make her way back to Anji's place. The dark roads were quiet and she wondered where all the red cabs were. She'd thought they ran all through the night. Or was that buses? She'd visited London on vacation when she was a student, but the memories seemed so hazy now.

Whatever, it looked like it might be a long walk back.

Anji couldn't say how long she'd been trapped, paralysed in her own body while the wraiths gloated and glided all around. Unable to blink, anaesthetised yet conscious she took in the creatures' intricate and unlikely dance.

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She felt detached from everything; wondered vaguely if she was dead and these things were hell's birds of prey, circling impatiently, waiting for some unknown signal when they would swoop and tear the unfeeling flesh from her bones.

And it was weird, she could only tell it was suddenly all over when her legs began to buzz and twitch with pins and needles. Her heart was sinking into her stomach as if she were rising headlong upwards in some sudden flight.

Then she was slumped on her knees. Probably there would be oil marks on her clothes from the filthy car park floor. They would be hell to shift.

But it wasn't concrete beneath her. It was smooth and polished wood.

She opened her eyes, and saw her palms splayed out on floorboards. When she raised her head, she let out a short shriek. A dark, fat, glistening shape was hovering towards her.

Carried by a small girl with long blonde hair and wonky blue eyes.

'It's all right, Mum,' whispered Chloe. 'We're here.'

Chloe knelt beside her, and awkwardly lay down the grey-black shape of her big dog to the floor. Except it wasn't a dog. It wasn't any animal she'd ever seen before.

'What the hell is that thing?' Anji said, recoiling.

'Jamais, in his real form,' whispered Chloe. 'My best friend. He saved you.'

The time-travelling animal, she realised. 'Saved me from what?'

'The mist things.' She sighed. 'They were never around at first. Then they started spying on us. Then they started to try and hurt us.'

Memories gushed back into Anji's mind, dark and awful. She opened her mouth to scream again without even knowing why, but Chloe

clamped a small hand against her lips.

‘Don’t,’ she hissed. ‘Erasmus is asleep. He mustn’t wake up. He mustn’t find us.’

Anji felt she was recovering some of her scattered wits. But some great spectral truth or realisation hung back as if hoping to stay forgotten. She rubbed her eyes, realised there were great, fat, relieved tears in them, and gave a snotty giggle of joy just to be alive. ‘Thank you, Chloe. You said you’d watch out for me.’

‘It was Jamais, really. He eats the mist things.’

‘Eats them?’

‘Absorbs them or something.’

Anji frowned suddenly. ‘Where am I, anyway?’

‘I brought you in from outside.’

‘And where’s –’ That spectre in the back of her mind stepped out into the spotlight, riverdancing like a clown. ‘The Doctor!’

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Chloe pointed over Anji’s shoulder. She whirled round and saw three huge round windows that gave on to a seething vista of smoke and shadow.

She was inside the building the Doctor had pointed out to her. While he was still out there, defenceless against these creatures.

‘Chloe, you must help the Doctor like you helped me.’

‘I tried,’ Chloe assured her. ‘He thinks his brain’s big enough to listen to them. To hear what they have to say, and maybe even talk back.’

‘Communicate,’ Anji said dully, remembering those last pained moments before the mist smothered them.

‘I do hope he can communicate with them,’ she said. ‘I asked him to tell them to stop hurting Jamais’s tummy.’

Anji nodded, transfixed by the frenzy of shape and shadow behind the circles of glass. She felt her every hair was standing on end, as if she’d had the most terrible nightmare and now was reliving it, watching it

happen to someone else.

A dark speck resolved itself out of the hellstorm, tumbling and rolling in midair, out of control. It was the Doctor, falling from the sky, flying like an ungainly bird.

‘Jamais,’ whispered Chloe urgently, trying to rouse the slab of dark furry flesh at her feet. ‘Jamais!’

He was heading straight for the window, too fast, too –

‘Jamais!’

The Doctor slammed up hard against the window and was squashed flat against its glistening, shining surface. He’d seen her. Anji stared helplessly as he scrabbled for a purchase, his eyes wide, terrified.

Jamais stirred, looked round groggily, growled and snapped his jaws. Chloe was rushing to the window, reaching out her tiny hands to the Doctor.

The air tingled about Anji as he fell soundlessly through the window, which darkened to night’s rich, velvety black behind him.

‘Doctor!’ Anji threw herself to the ground where he lay, feeling for a pulse.

There was nothing. His skin was cold, steaming like food taken out of the freezer, and it had a dead-turkey pallor to it.

She rested her head against his chest, listening for a heartbeat.

Then out of the silence came a single mournful beat. Then another. She held her breath, waiting for another. At last it came, and then its echo.

‘Fallen gods,’ the Doctor murmured softly. ‘Some creatures stay backstage in space-time for very good reason.’ His blue eyes snapped open, but they were unfocused. ‘Anji? Is that you?’ His voice was sharp. ‘Are you all right?’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m blind,’ he said, wonderingly. ‘I can’t see anything but those mists. . .’

Anji clutched hold of his shoulders. ‘Will it pass?’

‘It’s all right,’ he told her, apparently unbothered. ‘You could say I see everything, perfectly now.’ He giggled. ‘Everything.’

‘Doctor?’

‘Contact. Focus.’ He gave a sudden, drunken laugh. ‘It’s going to take some time to go back to these silly senses we rely on so frivolously.’

Anji felt uneasy, watching him twitch and shudder on the floor before her.

What if something had come back from the wraith world with him?

Chloe stole nearer to his prone form. ‘Did you ask about Jamais like I wanted you to?’

‘I asked all about Jamais, and all about you and your guardian. And they told me, too. Everything.’ The Doctor sniffed disapprovingly. ‘Now you must kill me.’ His eyes closed, he groped out blindly for Anji’s arm, took it and squeezed it hard. ‘I know too much, you see. . . ,’

Anji looked helplessly at Chloe. Jamais wagged his tail slowly and sullenly.

When Chloe noticed she gave him a fuss.

‘No one’s going to kill you, Doctor.’ Anji stroked his icy forehead. ‘You’re OK. You’re safe.’

‘Can never be safe,’ whispered the Doctor. ‘None of us. Not now everything. . . everything. . .’

‘Let it go,’ Chloe whispered to him, staring at him with those creepy eyes.

They seemed just the same colour as the Doctor’s eyes now. ‘You must let it go.’

The Doctor nodded and slipped off into sleep. Anji gripped his cold hand, and glanced out of the window. There was only darkness beyond, space with no stars. Blackness with no hope.

Guy was woken in the spare room by the tinkling of the extension. It was eight-thirty, and someone was on the phone.

Trix. What was she up to?

‘Good morning, I hope it’s not too early to call, but I have some important questions for the manager, is he in yet?’ Trix was speaking in a light Scottish accent. She sounded cute and sexy. Who wouldn’t want to tell her everything?

‘Yes, I’ll hold.’

There was a pause, and Guy sat up, scragging his fingers through his hair.

A sheaf of papers slithered off the bedclothes to the floor. The names of the victims versus the names on Mike’s licences. He’d intended having one last scan through them last night once they’d got back from the office, but had fallen into a deep sleep, dead to the world.

‘Mr Angel? My name’s Beatrice Montgomery, I’m calling from the Sea Fisheries Inspectorate. I understand you received a large order for funeral caskets 148

suitable for a burial at sea, is that correct?’ Guy listened in on her as he began to get dressed. He’d shower later. Maybe.

‘Well, the reason I ask, Mr Angel,’ Babe Beatrice went lilting on, ‘is that the inspection we carried out on your product was undertaken by a man we’ve since let go for incompetence. . . You’ll understand how importantly we treat such inspections. We have to be confident that the dear deceased aren’t going to come popping up to the surface like farts in the bathwater, eh?’

Guy frowned as he pulled up his socks. Nice image, Trix. He sniffed tentatively at a roll-on deodorant he’d found in Anji’s bathroom. Not too girly, he thought, and applied it.

He heard her give a bubbly giggle, which soon died. ‘No bulk orders? You’re sure of that? Only we’ve. . . Yes, but. . . Oh. OK. . . Bye.’

Guy heard her moving closer. He was starkers save for his socks! Desperately he grabbed last night’s pants and struggled into them. They were at half-mast when suddenly the door was flung open.

Ugh! So much for cute and sexy. She was still wearing the latex remains of her tea lady face, and looked about a hundred years old wrapped up in Anji’s dressing gown.

‘That was a waste of time,’ she announced casually in her own neutral accent, apparently oblivious to the fact he was crouched over double with his pants round his ankles. ‘No bulk orders. I’ll try the other company.’

Guy stared at her, red-faced and astounded. ‘Trix, would you mind buggering off while I get changed, please?’

‘Mum’s the word,’ Trix smiled coyly, and held out her hand. Guy swallowed hard – then realised she was talking about Anji’s deodorant on the dresser. He passed her the roll-on and she left without another word.

No sooner had Guy pulled up his pants and struggled into his trousers than there was a knock at the door.

‘Guy,’ Fitz called, ‘got any deodorant I can borrow?’

‘Sorry, mate.’ Guy opened the door. ‘You’re too late. Trix has got it.’

Fitz was stretching his gangly body, dressed in a pair of tweed trousers and an unbuttoned grubby shirt. ‘I’ll bet The Monkees never had this trouble,’ he sighed.

‘Any word from Anji?’ asked Guy.

‘No, nor the Doctor.’ Fitz looked glum. ‘Anji’s phone’s not responding.’

‘Maybe the battery’s dead,’ suggested Guy. ‘And Stacy?’

‘Crawled in to my bedroom in the wee hours.’

‘Oh yes?’ Guy smirked at him.

‘I don’t think she much cared who was in there,’ said Fitz ruefully. ‘Just zonked out on the floor.’

‘Even so. . .’ He smiled conspiratorially. ‘You would, wouldn’t you?’

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Fitz grinned. ‘Maybe. I’m a sucker for American accents.’

Guy nodded. ‘I’m sure Trix would put one on for you, seeing as you’ve been married and all. . .’

‘Get out of it.’ Fitz grimaced. ‘Anyway, didn’t I just see her coming out

of your room?’

‘Yeah, but. . .’ Guy looked down at his undone trousers and socks. ‘It’s not what you think!’ he gasped in a helpless maiden voice. And then, before he could stop himself: ‘So, what about Anji?’

Fitz’s smile faltered. ‘Eh?’

‘Well, you know. . . would you?’

‘Anji’s my mate.’ Fitz looked uncomfortable. ‘Not sure I think of her like that.’

‘So you’ve never. . .’

‘Give it a rest, eh?’ Fitz’s good humour had vanished. ‘It’s weird talking about her like that when we don’t even know where she is.’

Guy nodded, sheepishly. He’d only wanted to find out a bit more about her, what she was like to be with. There was something about her. . . But the stern look on Fitz’s long face spake clearly: Thus endeth the laddish conversation.

‘What’s that then?’ Fitz walked passed Guy to the dresser and picked up a little glass bottle. ‘Aftershave? That’d do. My pits reek.’

‘Thanks for sharing,’ said Guy, ‘but that’s just some cream the Doctor gave me for the burns I got.’ They’d more or less gone now. He only hoped Pete was healing as quickly.

Fitz unscrewed the cap and took a cautious sniff. ‘Think I’ll stick to reeking,’

he muttered, and chucked it over to Guy.

As Guy smeared on a little more lotion to the last pink patches around his collarbone, Fitz glanced down and noticed the pieces of paper on the floor.

‘Pity these didn’t check out,’ he said as he scooped them up.

Guy picked up yesterday’s shirt and put it on while Fitz flicked through the names on the licences. He could hear Trix outside using her Scottish voice on some other hapless coffin manufacturer.

He pulled on his trousers. ‘Guess Stacy’s never going to have evidence of what really happened to those people in Basalt’s snuff movies.’

‘Maybe it’s for the best,’ Fitz agreed. ‘Sometimes it’s best not to go poking your nose into stuff like that. . . ’ He trailed off. ‘Oh. My. God.’

Guy frowned. ‘What is it?’

‘I think we’ve got something here.’

‘Let me see.’

‘It’s probably nothing,’ Fitz said hastily, laying out certain pages on the crumpled duvet. ‘But look. Third name on Stacy’s list: Holly Fulbright. One of the names here on the licence list: Ivy Black.’

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‘Come on, that’s got to be coincidence.’ Guy felt a shiver brush down his spine. ‘Although it is lame enough for Mike to think of.’

‘Lateral thinking,’ said Fitz. ‘And here: Dean Brooks.’

Guy leafed through the printouts. ‘Martin Rivers! You’re kidding me!’

‘Dean Martin. . . Brook to river. . . ’ Fitz nudged Guy in the ribs ‘*Stream* of consciousness you might say.’

‘Ouch. Jesus, Fitz. I think you’re right.’

‘Could just be coincidence. . . ’

Guy clapped his hands together. ‘No, look. Who was that fella you were supposed to knock off?’

‘Pietro –’

‘Pietro Nencini, yeah? Look at this last one in the licence list, undated –

Peter Semprini.’ He waited for recognition to dawn in Fitz’s eyes. ‘Semprini!

Like in the Monty Python sketch. You know there’s the chemist’s shop and. . . ’

Fitz looked at him blankly but Guy was undeterred.

‘I’ll bet it was all he could come up with for an Italian! It’s just so him. He really thinks him and John Cleese were separated at birth.’

He and Fitz started laughing like schoolkids.

‘Let’s have another,’ said Guy. ‘Graeme Gallows? Tracy Marlowe?’

‘Can’t see any obvious matches,’ said Fitz, drumming his fingers on the paper.

‘A fair amount of these must be genuine burials, anyway.’

‘And I guess not all the names on Stacy’s list can be here.’ Fitz paused. ‘Can they?’

‘Depends when Basalt roped in Mike to start covering his tracks. Stacy said he went to England – about the time of. . . ’ Guy scanned Stacy’s list, excitement building. ‘. . . June Goodman.’

The pages skittered across the bed as Fitz flurried through them. ‘It’s got to be April Badlady or something.’

‘Badlady?’ snorted Guy. ‘No, it’s her, look – Julie Bonham.’

The air was fair crackling between them now. ‘What, Julie like July you mean?’

‘And Bonham from “bon homme”,’ cried Guy. ‘French for “good man”. Very clever.’

‘He’s just such a wit!’ said Fitz, clutching his ribs as if they were about to crack.

‘What the hell’s going on in here?’ demanded Trix. ‘I’m trying to act like I’m calling from an office and there’s you two whooping it up next door. . . ’

Guy shrugged, unable to stop grinning. ‘Sorry Trix, only we’ve had a bit of a breakthrough here.’

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‘Me too.’ She looked smug even through her latex mask. ‘That supplier did have the bulk order placed. And I managed to charm the delivery address out of him. It’s a warehouse outside Denham.’

‘Fab,’ said Fitz. ‘Well, in case you’re interested, you were totally wrong about the names on the list.’

‘Gloat all you like – once we’re on our way,’ she told him, unfazed as

usual.

‘We should strike while the iron’s hot.’

‘I hate ironing,’ Fitz complained.

‘What about Stacy?’ Guy suggested. ‘Strength in numbers?’

‘Crowded in Anji’s car,’ said Trix, shaking her head.

Fitz nodded. ‘Besides, she’s only had a few hours’ sleep.’

Guy nudged him in the ribs. ‘Tiger.’

‘Grrr,’ said Fitz, somewhere between Leslie Phillips and Tigger, making them both laugh.

‘Give me strength,’ sighed Trix. ‘And the driver’s seat!’

After what felt like hours, the Doctor began to warm up again. His breathing became deep and regular, the bluish tinge to his skin began to fade.

‘I think it might be bad that they talked to him,’ said Chloe. ‘While they were trying to get through before, it meant they had less energy to put into stopping me and Jamais and Erasmus.’

‘Stopping you from stealing people from one universe and hiding them here?’ asked Anji pointedly.

‘And where did you find the book?’ The Doctor sat bolt upright as he asked the question, stared across at Chloe.

‘You can see?’ asked Anji.

‘More clearly all the time. Well?’

‘The book,’ Chloe said quietly, ‘found me. It was waiting just for me. A future history.’

‘But who wrote the book, Chloe?’

She shrugged. ‘Maybe we all write it. That’s why we’re all in it.’

‘Could it belong to those wraith things? Is that why they’re so pissed off at you, they want it back?’

‘No, they’re angry because of what Timeless does.’ The Doctor looked at Anji gravely. ‘Because of the damage they’ve done to this reality, passing back and forth, playing with the parallels.’

‘We don’t play!’ Chloe stroked Jamais fiercely. ‘We just help people, that’s all. The people that I find.’

‘You’re a Sensitive,’ said the Doctor encouragingly. ‘You see things, feel things that others don’t.’

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Chloe nodded. ‘When my other heart shrivelled and had to be cut out, it left me with new sight.’

‘You used to have two hearts?’ Anji turned to the Doctor, who was staring in shock. ‘But Doctor, that’s like –’

He shushed her quickly, all his concentration fixed fiercely on Chloe. ‘It’s her story we want,’ he hissed.

‘I find people on lesser Earths who are hurting,’ she began. ‘You know, people from the alternative realities. Then, me and Erasmus, we take them here. To Real Earth.’ She smiled suddenly. ‘Jamais sucks out their souls and breathes them into the body of their double. We give them a fresh chance –

here.’

Anji’s eyes widened. ‘Their souls?’

The Doctor seemed dismissive. ‘I imagine she’s speaking figuratively. Jamais can harness unthinkable energies instinctively. A man is the sum of his memories, and characters form over time.’

‘Growing up is a form of time travel?’ Anji ventured.

‘Of course it is. And Jamais must be able to capture that experiential energy that builds over time. A life essence, if you will.’

‘But how could he know to do that? He’s an animal.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘How does a spider spin its web? How does a caterpillar know to prepare for metamorphosis? Explanations are for those looking on. Those that can do it just get on with it.’

Anji turned back to Chloe. ‘So what about those poor people who were

just getting on with it – the people on Real Earth who find themselves replaced?

What happens to them once you've inserted someone else's soul in their body?'

'They are displaced as the new soul asserts itself.'

'They die.'

Chloe shook her head. 'They just change. All people change, with time.'

'With time, yes,' breathed the Doctor. 'It's not an instant process, is it? The leftovers are still needed – the person you dragged here from a lesser Earth forms a fund of energy that the transplanted soul must draw upon until stability is reached in its new body. And because you can't have two identical people being witnessed during the process of stabilisation, you send the leftovers off into hiding.'

Anji nodded. 'Or ideally ship them to another country, so if it's discovered there's two versions of the same person knocking about, they're harder to trace.' A sort of cold excitement was balling in her stomach as everything fell into place at last. 'But why kill the people you bring back from a lesser Earth?

Why not help them find new identities or –'

Chloe shook her head. 'Final stability is only achieved once the exhausted original body is. . . '

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'Killed? Of course,' said the Doctor. 'Otherwise the transferred soul will slowly revert back to the original form as Time tries to right the damage.'

'Besides, the process wears them down,' Chloe said sadly. 'Makes them simple and weak. It's better we clear them away.'

'That's horrible,' said Anji. She turned to the Doctor. 'Remember that woman Fitz saw in Bournemouth, the double of the one that Basalt murdered. . . '

He nodded. 'I suppose that where necessary, the cuckoo soul is drafted in to help cover up what's really happened. To allay any suspicions

over a sudden disappearance.’ He flashed a dark smile at Anji. ‘After-sales service, I suppose you could call it. The woman’s neighbours might be puzzled by her slightly odd behaviour, but they’ll accept she’s simply moving away. . . .’

‘Whereas who’s going to miss poor old Nencini at all.’ said Anji bitterly,

‘shut away in a concrete box in Streatham?’

‘Don’t hate me,’ Chloe pleaded. ‘It’s nasty and cruel and horrid, but if we’re to help and protect anyone it is. . . .’ She said the word like it tasted bad:

‘. . . necessary.’

‘None of this is necessary!’ Anji argued. ‘You protect people prepared to hijack someone else’s life, to live their lives for them, even to participate in the cover-up! I don’t know how they live with themselves.’

‘They forget all that they were, once the soul is assimilated into its new form and two become one,’ said Chloe. ‘But the joy they feel as they find themselves here in a new life, a better life. . . oh, it’s like waking from a terrible dream, and feeling the sun on your face. . . And they’re so happy to be alive. To know that everything’s all right now.’ The little girl closed her eyes and smiled.

‘That’s the timeless moment that makes everything worthwhile.’

‘Timeless moment?’ Anji snorted. ‘What are you doing, quoting your own ad campaign?’ She stared helplessly at the strange little girl who seemed so innocent. ‘None of this can be worthwhile, Chloe, not when it’s balanced out by murder.’

‘But –’

‘And since you’re not very good at the details of how to murder someone and get away with it,’ the Doctor cut in, ‘you find people who are, to do your dirty work for you.’

Chloe shot him a reproachful glance. ‘I hate the clearing away.’

‘But if the originals have to die, then best it be done neatly and without fuss, hmm?’ The Doctor’s voice had hardened. ‘It’s quite an operation, isn’t it?’

Can't be cheap.'

Chloe looked back down at Jamais, who had wriggled his head into her lap. 'It's why Erasmus charges for our service. He says we have to treat it like 154

business to make it work. It was me who thought of the name,' she added proudly.

'And I suppose Daniel Basalt is the Timeless employee of the month?' The Doctor gave a sardonic smile. 'With the rather enterprising stand he's taken on your clean-up operation.'

'I hate him,' hissed Chloe.

'Maybe,' said Anji. 'But it's *your* fault. You've let him foster a whole community of low-lives who pay to kill people with no comeback.'

The little girl's face crumpled in tears. 'Don't hate me, *please*.'

'Why did you use him in the first place?' Anji demanded.

'Because he's efficient,' the Doctor surmised. 'And Erasmus needs that. The more technologically advanced the world becomes, the harder it is to pull off these callous stunts without discovery.' The sneer was back on his lips. 'So while any old killer with a taste for silver would've done for the job in the old days, in the twenty-first century a more sophisticated disposal structure is required.'

'And who cares how cruel it is?' Anji added bitterly.

'I care.' Chloe sounded unexpectedly fierce. 'Even if Erasmus does not.'

That's why I asked you to stop him. Before we must take him away to another Earth like Erasmus has promised.'

'So that's Basalt's real payment,' breathed the Doctor, lying back down as if suddenly exhausted. 'Escape. A passport to a better life.'

Guy wound up driving Anji's car to Basalt's warehouse; Fitz and Trix had both fancied a go, but he pointed out that he was the only one with a valid licence.

'Should've got your mates to fix us one up, shouldn't you, Susan?' grumped Fitz from the passenger seat. He turned to her, bunched up in the back seat, and sighed theatrically. 'I knew you'd end up looking like your mother.'

‘Oh, shut up,’ said Trix, staring out of the window at the grey morning traffic with the map book open on her lap. She’d touched up her old woman disguise so it was better than ever. She said that if Basalt was around she didn’t want him recognising her; which hadn’t made Fitz feel a whole lot better about going in plainclothes.

Fitz sighed. ‘Wish we knew where the Doctor and Anji had got to.’

‘Probably taking in the Florentine sights.’ muttered Trix, ‘while we chase round like eager puppies digging up bones for him.’

‘What are we going to do?’ asked Guy as he joined the M40 out of London.

‘Raid this warehouse single-handed?’

‘Sure,’ said Fitz. ‘And if Basalt’s there, we capture him and turn him over to the police on a charge of buying over-elaborate coffins.’

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‘We snoop round his place and gather evidence.’ said Trix patiently. ‘Pin down the whole thing about what’s happening, how he’s involved.’

Fitz looked uppity at Trix’s image in the rear-view. ‘Changed your tune, haven’t you? Thought you were all ready to go rushing in guns blazing.’

‘What, so I have to pick one approach to a problem and stick to it doggedly whatever happens in the meantime?’ She looked back at him, the picture of aged innocence. ‘Is that the way you do it in this time-travelling game, oh wise one?’

Fitz grimaced. ‘Lucky for you I wouldn’t hit an old lady,’ he grumbled.

They carried on in silence. Guy enjoyed flooring the MG on the more open roads of the A40 once they’d passed the perimeter of the M25. ‘Jesus, I remember the countryside!’ he called cheerily.

‘I used to come this way to visit my mum,’ said Fitz sadly. ‘On the bus to West Wycombe.’

‘No time to visit her now, I guess,’ chirped Guy as he razzed past a black BMW on the inside lane.

‘She’s dead,’ Fitz told him. ‘But hey, she tried to kill me before she

passed on if it's any consolation.'

'We should start a club, mate,' Guy told him. 'Comes to something when even your mum takes a pop at –'

With a sickening crunch something smashed into the back of them.

'What the –' yelled Guy. It was the BMW.

'That's not her now, is it?' enquired Trix, rubbing her neck.

'Bit of an overreaction for passing him in the inside lane,' Guy shouted, honking the MG's horn. But the BMW was driving in for another bash.

'Floor it!' yelled Fitz.

But as Guy tried to pull away, an Escort ahead of them swung into their path from the middle lane. He braked and spun the wheel to the right, clipping the Escort's rear bumper. Horns beeped and blared all around them.

The windscreen was clouding up. Guy fumbled with the air conditioning –

then his guts twisted with fear as he realised what was happening.

He swore. 'That mist stuff! It's happening to me again!'

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Twenty-five

Pilgrimage

'I just don't understand you, Chloe.' Anji shook her head to emphasise the point. 'You talk about caring. . . You reward a cold, brutal murderer like Basalt with cash for clearing away your leftovers, but what about your other victims?'

How is it fair that all the happy, successful people you turn into carriers for the screw-ups on a lesser Earth should have everything taken away for someone else to enjoy?'

'But they're the same person,' said Chloe, confused. 'Like I said, two become one. They live on, don't you see?'

‘No,’ said Anji. ‘I don’t see.’

‘Think of a train journey, Anji,’ said the Doctor, lying on the floor beside her.

Clearly he was still weak from his experiences with the wraiths. ‘The 17.10

from Marylebone becomes the 17.51 from Saunderton, becomes the 17.57

from Princes Risborough. . . it’s not the train that changes each time it passes through a station. It’s the perception of whoever’s interacting with it.’

‘You’re condoning this?’

‘I’m explaining it,’ said the Doctor quietly. ‘The view of life as it must seem to two spirits as misguided as Chloe and Erasmus.’

‘We’re helping people, whatever you say,’ Chloe insisted. ‘These poor ones who took the wrong turns, who made mistakes, who lost the people they love. . .

Who will champion them?’ As Chloe paused, Jamais gave a low whimper as if in sympathy. ‘For every single person in this one true reality, there are an infinity of shadows who turned out differently. But they’re all the same person. Once we found Jamais could travel to these other universes we knew we had to help these poor shadows. To let some of them know what it’s like to succeed before their lives blink out as the universes collapse. . . before so many die.’ She smiled shyly. ‘I go walking. People brush against me and I just know things about them. That’s how I find the poor ones, you see. And then we help them.’

Anji wanted to shake her. ‘But even if it didn’t involve murder the other end

– people you just happen to bump into on the street? It’s all so random!’

‘We save who we can. So many people will die. . . you can’t know how many.’ Anji watched a tear zigzag down Chloe’s cheek. ‘But I do. And I know 157

it is better to care for a special few than to serve everyone badly.’

Anji hated herself, but she could see the glimmer of something in the little girl's naive argument. Since the different realities had gone into meltdown, the Doctor had been forced into some pretty stark choices. As a side effect of his actions on one occasion, a whole universe was put to death.

No survivors.

Chloe's way, certain souls were treasured, nurtured, saved. Of course, the thought of picking out just a few lives from countless millions was terrible, ridiculous. On what grounds would you rule the decisions? What possible selection process could you apply?

That's when she realised she was taking to the decision-making process her own prejudices, her need for a business rationale, to make sure it was a shrewd investment. Erasmus used the innocent mind of a small, curious girl to decide for him. And Anji was shocked to concede that, given the scale of the situation they were speaking of, if you were set on such an eccentric scheme it was as good a means of deciding as any.

'Anyway,' sighed Chloe, licking her finger and rubbing it against Jamais's nose. 'Within another hundred years, all the other universes will have collapsed. Our work here is almost done.'

'Do you come from Earth yourselves?' asked Anji.

'No. This has been our pilgrimage.' Chloe calmed her stroking of her pet's smooth head. 'Our home was destroyed. Our people went rotten and our world followed on. It had to be cut out by the Blessed Destroyer – that's what Erasmus says.'

'Blessed Destroyer,' echoed the Doctor, with a deep shuddering breath. 'And you were set adrift in time and space with nowhere to go.'

'We wandered eternity. Set beacons for more of our kind. We searched the ashes of dead suns to find the magic of the old stellar engineers. And we tried to find our old home still alive in other universes.'

The Doctor was hugging his knees, rocking back and forth.

'And did you?' asked Anji.

'No,' said Chloe simply. 'But we stumbled upon other survivors. There weren't many. But those we saw were not content merely observing the universe they travelled through. You have to interfere, you have to

get involved, it's important. We learned that when the Blessed Destroyer wiped out our world.'

'The only way they could make sense of the catastrophe,' murmured the Doctor. He chose not to meet her wonky gaze.

'It was good our world went,' she insisted. 'We all learned that sacrifices must be made. That good should be pursued, always. The survivors, they spoke of the holy world of Earth, linked to our own world in the old records.'

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She sounded like she was quoting a scripture. 'Earth, beloved of the Destroyer.

Earth, where one-hearted humans dwell, an inventive, invincible, indomitable species. . . '

'Please,' said the Doctor, strangely shiftily and yet clearly moved by what the little girl was saying. 'I'm sure you've been acting from the most laudable of motives. But the way you've used Jamais to ferry people between one universe and the next has done great harm to the structure of time and space.'

Anji looked at the dark lump at Chloe's knees, its breathing fast and shallow, then up at Chloe. 'And to think I reckoned you were just some poor child mixed up in all this. What are you?'

'I am very old,' said Chloe slowly. 'But I cannot grow. Not since the clock of my world stopped ticking.' She paused, gazing at Anji with adoration. 'I wish to grow, as you have. I wish to make people's lives better, as you have. . . '

Mum.'

Anji shivered and turned away.

'How can this be happening?' Fitz shouted, banging his head on the window as Guy swung the wheel hard left to dodge a Rover and get back to the inside lane. 'These are total strangers trying to kill you! I thought they had to know you or something?'

'Bet it's the car they've got a grudge against,' Trix assured him. 'Haven't you ever wanted to run one of these off the road?'

‘Not much. But I think I’m about to!’ Guy swore again, his eyes streaming.

‘I can’t see a thing!’

‘Give me the wheel!’ yelled Fitz. Guy felt the cool leather twist under his fingers, but too late – the car lurched with a sickening impact as someone sideswiped the rear driver’s side.

‘We’re taking this next exit,’ Trix snapped. ‘There’s a huge tanker up ahead and I’ve seen *Terminator 2*.’

Guy whacked at the indicator.

‘Slow down!’ Fitz heaved the wheel round to the left. ‘This is us!’

‘I told you, I can’t see a bloody thing!’

He heard the engine growl angrily as their speed dipped too low for the gear, and changed down blindly.

‘Why couldn’t Anji have an automatic?’ complained Fitz as they swung a juddering left and on to another road.

‘Hey! We wanted to go this way anyway, that was the right exit.’ Trix pointed this out like it would cheer them up.

‘Hallelujah,’ muttered Guy. ‘Please can we stop now?’

‘Lay-by,’ announced Fitz. ‘Slow her down. Faster.’

Guy began to accelerate and Fitz jerked hard on the wheel.

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‘No, I mean, slow her down faster than –’

The car whumped into something and everyone screamed as it felt for a second like the car would roll over. But instead, as Guy yanked up hard on the handbrake it came to a slow, grinding, graunching halt.

‘Well,’ said Fitz. ‘That was a sticky moment.’

‘I’d call it a soaking wet one,’ Guy muttered as he killed the engine.

‘Never mind,’ called Trix as she opened her door. ‘Your underwear was dirty anyway, right?’

Guy's eyes cleared of the mist, and he saw the MG had ploughed a snaking way through a reservation of earth blocking the lay-by from the main road.

Now it was pointing up the rise as if about to blast off into the pale blue sky.

A snack truck was parked nearby and its oversized clientele stared at them slack-jawed, bits of bacon buttie falling from their lips.

He jumped as Trix banged on his window. 'Get out from there, Schumacher.

Licence or not, I'm driving.'

Guy almost fell out of the car, shaking with shock.

'Get a move on,' said Fitz worriedly. 'Those bruisers don't look too impressed that we interrupted their breakfast. We don't want them having a go too.'

Trix hit the ignition as Guy wrestled feebly with the buckled door.

'Look at the state of this car,' he moaned. 'Anji is going to k—'

'Don't even think it,' Fitz warned him. Guy fell inside and Trix gunned the rattling engine, ready to reverse down the bank and back on to the tarmac.

Anji wished the Doctor would recover enough for them to get out of here.

This gloomy room with its endless night through the window was beginning to freak her out. She could feel all kinds of weird vibrations in the floor, and the soft, lulling noises of some strange machinery nearby.

'Chloe,' said the Doctor softly, 'time is running out to put things right.'

'The wraiths told you that?' Anji asked, suspiciously.

'Yes. They've been trying to communicate with Chloe and Erasmus, but Jamais has been neutralising them. They can't operate efficiently in this physical realm, and we can't operate in theirs – believe me.' He sighed. 'Anyway. Unable to get through to Chloe and friends, they tried to influence other humans.

To eliminate Guy.'

'Guy! But. . . why?' Anji felt like tearing her hair out in frustration. 'What's a minor civil servant dealing with fish quotas ever done to the universe?'

'They can't tell.'

'Nothing to do with that glitch in his DNA you picked up on?'

'I suppose it must be, somehow. He's certainly linked to the damage in some way.'

'And so is Sabbath,' Chloe announced.

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The girl had hissed the name with the same loathing and weariness it provoked in Anji. 'How do you know about Sabbath?' she asked the child.

'I met him once. When I touched him, I knew about you. And about the plans he would have for Guy one day.' Chloe tickled Jamais's ear, and the animal rallied a little, raising its head. 'It hurt just to touch him. When I recovered, the book was just lying there beside me.'

Anji stared at the Doctor, scared and confused. 'Sabbath wrote that book?'

'And I knew I had to take it with me,' Chloe said miserably. 'I just knew.'

'And so do the wraiths,' said the Doctor distantly, apparently away in some other world. 'It's a mess. And we've made it all a lot worse by looking after Guy as Chloe said – instead of allowing him to die.'

Anji couldn't believe what she was hearing. 'How can you even say that?'

she croaked.

'I saved the lives of you and your friends when you breached this universe, Doctor,' said Chloe coldly, wiping the tears from her cheeks. 'And you promised you'd help him for me. He's not a poor one to be helped in our usual way, but I know he's –'

'The most special man in the whole universe, because that wretched

book tells you so,’ sneered the Doctor.

‘And you’re now quite happy to see him die because those wraith things tell *you* so,’ said Anji. ‘So which is better?’

‘Neither!’ said the Doctor hotly, and Chloe had to put a finger to her lips and shush him.

‘You should go,’ she hissed. ‘Erasmus will wake soon. There is a meeting we have to attend this morning.’

‘With whom?’ enquired the Doctor, getting unsteadily to his feet.

‘With him. Daniel Basalt.’

‘I thought you wanted me to stop him for you,’ the Doctor said bitterly.

‘But Mr Nencini is still alive,’ mused Chloe. ‘He must be cleared away to stabilise the transfer.’

‘Now you expect me to let him kill again before I stop him? If I can stop him?’ The Doctor shook his head and took a step towards Chloe.

Then Jamais rose a little way and growled.

And Anji and the Doctor were out in the street, sprawling on the hard pavement.

The Doctor was up in a moment, beating on the green front door beside them. ‘I’ve been thrown out of better places, you know!’

‘Stop shouting,’ Anji hissed at him, scrabbling for the loose change and tissues that had fallen from her bag. ‘People are staring.’ She looked round, trying to get her bearings, scrambled up from the ground. It was a bright

morning, and passers-by were giving them wary looks. Across the road was the car park the TARDIS had arrived in – probably hours ago.

‘We’ve got to stop this,’ the Doctor cried miserably. Then Anji nearly collapsed as he lost his balance and stumbled into her. She fought to bear his weight. ‘Doctor? What is it, what’s wrong?’

‘The atmosphere in there,’ he gasped. ‘The Timeless building. Sustaining me, after. . . after what happened.’

‘Those wraith things,’ muttered Anji darkly. ‘Are they going to come back?’

He shook his head. ‘They were directing my attention before. Now they’ve taken it by force. I’ve promised them I’ll do all I can but there’s so little time. . .

for them and for us.’

‘Lean on me,’ she told him. ‘Let’s get you back to the TARDIS.’ She staggered away from the green door. ‘And hope it’s not more than a tenner for a Police Box on overnight stay, ’cause that’s all I’ve got.’

The three loud knocks on the warehouse door echoed inside and obliterated every other sound.

Basalt watched as the four apes stood to sudden attention, their weapons trained on the doorway – including the chimp who’d been sat beside him, trying to stare him out with his big black eyes.

Sabbath, who had only recently emerged hale and hearty and clearly refreshed from the dark rear of the warehouse, smiled knowingly at that skinny creep Kalicum. The guy was supposed to be a surgeon, but with the dark crust-ing of blood on his white coat, he looked more like a butcher. He was holding some kind of crazy metal net in his long, fidgeting fingers – just the right size for Jamais. There seemed to be a tiny bulb set into every link, glowing a dark shade of blue.

‘Answer the door, Mr Basalt,’ suggested Sabbath. ‘Do not keep your erst-while employers waiting.’

Basalt rose, twitched his forearm and felt the comforting weight of the concealed knife taped to his wrist. He walked across the room in long, confident strides, aware that all eyes were on him.

A simple pull on his cuff and the tape broke, the knife slithered down into his grip. No one realised a thing. The second that little blonde freak stepped through the door Basalt would grab her by the neck and use her as a shield.

How’d Sabbath like her with her throat slit? He smiled. He was going to take her and make her make him disappear. . .

He reached the door and pulled across the heavy bolt holding it locked in place. Then, with a deep breath, he prepared to pounce and wrenched open the door.

A split second later he realised he was grabbing an old lady, staring at him through thick spectacles, her eyes round and wide in alarm. Committed to action he spun her round, locked one arm about her neck and swung her body round to cover his own, the knife held to her cheek.

‘I thought this was the cash and carry!’ the old lady squawked.

‘Don’t move!’ Basalt bellowed, his heart sinking further with every beat.

‘Anyone!’

‘Or you’ll do what?’ Sabbath enquired casually. ‘Kill an old woman? Do you truly imagine I would care in the slightest?’

‘Oh sweet God,’ muttered the old woman, holding herself stock-still in Basalt’s grip. ‘Him again.’

But Basalt was barely listening. Sabbath was right. He had a useless hostage. But they wouldn’t want him dead until Erasmus and Chloe were here, for sure. He knew he was safe till. . .

Basalt heard a low growl and felt the muzzle of a gun push into the side of his skull. Another chimp was standing just behind him.

‘Really, Mr Basalt,’ called Sabbath almost sadly as the knife fell to the floor with a clatter. ‘Did you really think I wouldn’t have guards placed outside the building too?’

The old woman pushed a hand inside her coat and pressed it against her heart. She started to rock and shake like she was having some kind of heart attack.

‘That’s it,’ said Guy grimly, holding out his trembling mobile for Fitz’s scrutiny.

‘Panic button. She’s pressed send, made the call.’

Fitz swore. ‘She shouldn’t have gone alone.’

‘Her idea. And she *was* in disguise,’ Guy reminded him.

‘Guess the place is guarded after all.’ He sighed. ‘Fab. Guy, you ever heard of the Dambusters?’

Guy nodded. 'Daaa, da, da, da, da-da-da, da, daaa. . .'

'That's the one,' said Fitz, and joined in with the jaunty theme as he revved the throaty engine of Anji's car, put it in gear and floored the accelerator. The wheels screeched as they bit into the dirt track that led up to the warehouse.

What the hell are we going to do? thought Guy madly, and in the absence of anything more constructive he kept on singing.

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Twenty-six

Shooting apes

Basalt shoved the old lady away from him. She fell to the ground, still twitching and shaking.

'Where did she come from?' Kalicum spoke to the ape like he expected an answer. 'Why did you allow her so close?'

The chimp pointed out of the doorway.

Sabbath seemed unruffled. 'I imagine that since the old woman appeared non-hostile, and in the absence of specific instructions, my guard simply observed and acted when she became a threat to our security.'

'Wilful animal!' howled Kalicum, pulling restlessly at his net like he was about to tear it in two. 'You take orders! You do not think for yourself!'

'Get rid of her,' snapped Sabbath, with a brief glare at his skinny companion.

The pressure of the gun barrel at Basalt's temple lessened a little. Then suddenly the chimp gave a low growl of warning.

'Out of sight,' hissed Sabbath.

The chimpanzee guard looked around, uncertain, for somewhere to hide.

The old lady's wrinkled-stockinged leg went into spasm and she jabbed her heel into the ape's ankle. At the same time, Basalt elbowed it in the ribs.

The animal staggered backwards with a squeal of annoyance. At the same time, Basalt snatched the gun from its hairy hand and shot it right in the face.

The chimp was knocked backwards through the doorway and fell lifelessly outside.

There was a sharp shriek. Chloe.

‘Get out of here, Erasmus!’ Basalt bellowed, and threw himself through the doorway.

A rifle shot echoed after him, then another, but Sabbath’s voice carried clearly above the din: ‘No! The girl and her creature must not be harmed!

Capture them!’

Basalt was up on his feet in moments, the chittering and screeching of the apes behind him building to a crescendo. Erasmus was staring at him in surprise, and Jamais was barking fiercely, hobbling about and snapping at Basalt’s legs. He kicked the beast away. Then he heard the sound of a powerful motor getting nearer, and distant gunfire.

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‘It’s a trap, Erasmus,’ snapped Basalt. ‘Come on, my car’s just here. But if I get you out of this, you’ve got to disappear me now, understand?’ He thrust the gun in Erasmus’s face. ‘Understand?’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Erasmus, his face uncomprehending.

‘Who’s that lying on Chloe?’

Basalt glanced down. ‘Jesus, give me strength,’ he muttered.

The chimp’s bloody corpse had collapsed right slap bang on top of his ticket out of here. It was pinning Chloe helplessly to the ground.

Guy felt like a human pinball as Fitz razzed the car in fifth gear over the potholed lane towards the grey, flat slab of the warehouse. They’d given up on Dambusters and moved on to the James Bond theme, only somewhere in Guy’s head he could hear the Funeral March.

‘Reckon this thing’s the only weapon we’ve got,’ shouted Fitz over the engine roar and Guy’s brass section impersonation.

‘Yeah, but it can kill us just as easily!’ Guy yelled back. ‘Shouldn’t you slow down?’

Fitz hit the brakes. Guy’s seat belt bit into him as he lurched forwards. Then two apes in dark blue jackets rose up from a nearby hillock and opened fire.

‘Whoah!’ Fitz and Guy screamed as one.

Unlike in the movies, the bullets found their marks immediately. The windscreen splintered like cracked ice.

‘Punch it out!’ said Fitz reasonably, like this was the sort of thing he dealt with every day.

‘You crazy? It’s glass!’ Guy shouted back. But he smashed his fist against it just the same. It exploded outwards and they could see again. He whooped in surprise and delight, and sucked his raw knuckles.

Fitz was mounting the hillock in third gear, still doing about fifty miles an hour, heading for the improbable apes. The beasts leaped too late and the car struck them. Thankfully they vanished from view as the car flew over the top of the little rise of land. There was an awful second of freefall then they hit the ground, pitched up on two wheels.

‘Lean my way!’ bellowed Guy over Fitz’s wild screaming.

They threw themselves to the left and the car righted itself, thundering over the uneven ground. Fitz struggled to control their flight, yanking up on the handbrake and sending them careening in a tight arc. Another ape popped up from hiding with its gun at the ready. The MG spun round as if of its own accord and whumped his legs away from him.

This was like a PG Tips commercial as filmed by Quentin Tarrantino. ‘What the hell is going on? Chimps with guns?’

Fitz shrugged. ‘Looks like Sabbath’s in town. He’s got a thing for apes.’

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‘I don’t want to know,’ said Guy, feeling suddenly nauseous as the car finally rattled to a halt. ‘I think I’m going to be sick.’

‘Can you project?’ Fitz gestured to the windscreen. ‘Back in two

shakes.’ He threw open the car door and ran over to where the fallen chimp lay.

Unable to find the button for the electric windows, Guy had no choice but to lean forwards and heave his hastily eaten breakfast back up through the shattered windscreen.

A moment later Fitz came back, waving the ape’s rifle in triumph. He frowned at the mess dribbling off the bonnet.

‘Blimey, Guy,’ he said. ‘Don’t you think this poor car’s been abused enough?’

‘I’m feeling pretty strange,’ said Guy, wiping his claggy lips.

‘The mist again?’

‘No. . . the opposite, really.’ He rubbed his eyes. ‘Everything seems too bright. . . ’

‘Shock, Gunner Adams,’ said Fitz in a clipped, upper class military manner.

‘That’s all.’ He handed Guy the rifle. ‘Now, I’ll drive, you provide covering fire against those damned filthy apes. If you shoot the same way you spew then we’re laughing.’

Guy gritted his teeth and gripped the rifle. ‘Here we go, then. *The A-Team* meets *Animal Hospital*.’

‘Huh?’

‘Forget it, sucker,’ growled Guy, but he winced as a stabbing pain behind his eyes kicked in. He said nothing, not wishing to distract Fitz who was already swinging round the car, and soon they were thundering back towards the warehouse. Guy let off a test shot, felt the kickback of the stock into his shoulder. ‘Just letting them know we’re coming.’

Suddenly a door was kicked opened in the back of the warehouse and half a dozen more armed apes came bouncing out.

‘Do they ever know we’re coming!’ Fitz yelled.

‘Try and get round the front,’ said Guy, firing a wild shot, hoping to intimidate them. No chance. Bullets whizzed and pranged into the side of the car as Fitz raced for the shelter of the warehouse wall.

He was about to take the corner when a tyre blew. The car shook violently, rattled from side to side as Fitz lost control. Seconds later they smacked into the side of a rusty white van. The impact shook them like rag dolls against the seat belts.

‘Fitz,’ gasped Guy, his neck stiff and stinging, ‘you all right?’

‘Yeah, I’m terrific.’ He was already fumbling in a panic for his seat belt.

‘Come on, we’ve got to get out of here. They’ll be on us any second.’

But as Guy opened his mouth to answer he found he couldn’t move.

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Just then his head seemed to erupt in a violent fountain of noise. He could see Fitz staring at him, feel pressure round his cramped waist and his shoulder release as the seat belt slithered clear. But he couldn’t hear what Fitz was saying any more.

And it didn’t matter.

Only one thing mattered now.

‘Get this thing off me!’ shrieked Chloe, as she struggled to push the chimp’s floppy dead weight clear. Cursing loudly, Basalt stooped quickly to help her but another guard had emerged behind him, gun raised.

Jamais reared up in front of the ape, his neck snaking away from his shoulders till his sleek black head was towering above its own. Then he opened his jaws and bit at the chimp’s head.

In the blink of an eye the chimp was a skeleton in a ragged tunic and its dusty skull was cracking in Jamais’s jaws like an oversized nut.

Basalt didn’t have time to freak out. He managed to heave the dead animal from Chloe’s wriggling body, but as he did so three more apes burst through the doorway.

One of the new guards swiped at Jamais’s neck with his rifle butt, landed a heavy blow. Jamais whined and fell backwards over Chloe and the corpse.

She cried out in fear and crouched over his prone body.

Basalt brought up his gun and fired again. Another guard went down, clutching with hairy hands at the blood pouring from its big bald ear.

Just as the other two performing chimps were about to blow out Basalt's brains, a green MG swerved noisily around the corner and smashed into Chong's ramshackle van. The guards turned on instinct to see what was happening.

Basalt gunned them both down before they could react.

But then Sabbath's massive frame loomed up in the doorway, affording only a glimpse of the spindly Kalicum following close behind. With a speed Basalt didn't expect the big man kicked the gun out of his hand and angrily lunged for his throat.

Basalt threw himself backwards, rolling over and landing on his feet. He started to run for his car. 'With me, Erasmus! Come on!'

But the idiot just stood there in utter confusion. 'Chloe!' he called. 'Are you all right?'

Basalt heard Chloe scream.

He glanced behind and saw Kalicum had

thrown his metal net over her. But with a clicking, clacking, grinding noise the net was growing larger, its links glowing a deep azure as it spread swiftly to smother Jamais as well.

'Stop this!' Erasmus's voice rose in anger. 'Let them go!'

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Basalt reached his car and squeezed inside. As he started up the Porsche he realised that Sabbath was paying him no more heed, all his gloating attention on his new captives. Some apes were running and jumping towards the battered wreck of the MG, but it was empty now. Some guy with his back to Basalt was making his way over towards Sabbath. The guards were ready to fire but Kalicum was holding up his hands, warning them off.

A few of the guards turned to fire at Basalt as he swept past in the Porsche, but he was soon out of range, careening along the lane that led to the main road and safety.

Safety, thought Basalt bitterly. With Timeless broken up, all his hopes

of escaping this damned world were gone. Why should Sabbath bother with him now the fat creep had what he wanted? What was Basalt going to do – come back with the cops? Lead some kind of counterstrike? With Chong dead and Erasmus captured he was completely isolated.

Daniel Basalt was washed up, finished.

Vulnerable.

He remembered Sabbath's talk of the girl's book, of what was written and would come to pass. Basalt had trapped Chloe for Sabbath quite unwittingly –

by trying to escape. Had Sabbath known all along that was going to happen?

Was that why he'd kept Basalt alive, as a plaything to unknowingly do his bidding?

Basalt started screaming at the top of his lungs, hit the stereo and cranked up the volume as loud as it would go. The bass blasted out with the sibi-lant ticks of the drum samples, the stuttering rhythm almost drowning out the pounding in his head. He swung out on to the main road and headed drunkenly back to London.

Jesus Christ, he wasn't going out like this.

Trix looked up warily from the cold, hard floor of the deserted warehouse.

She'd lain here as quiet and still as possible while everyone rushed about playing cowboys and Indians. And now the shooting had stopped, she found she was even more scared. What had happened to Fitz and Guy?

Stealthily, she'd spun herself round and crawled to the door to peep outside.

There was Sabbath, looking even meaner and still heavier than the last time their paths had crossed (successful scheming was clearly deleterious to his waistline), together with the human Twiglet with the squeaky voice. His magic net was pulsing over a kid and some weird doglike thing, both lying very still. Another big bloke nearby was looking understandably baffled as a couple of gorillas pointed guns at his head.

And stalking towards them all, a fierce look on his chalk-white face, was Guy.

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‘Get back, you idiot,’ muttered Trix in disbelief. Was this some kind of mad distraction technique? Was Fitz sneaking in the back way to. . .

But no one moved against Guy.

He marched right past Sabbath and

crouched over the girl in the net. He reached through, pulled something from the pocket of her pale blue jacket. A black pouch.

Skinny Man squealed with delight as Guy emptied the pouch into Sabbath’s outstretched palm.

Diamonds.

Sabbath gave a dry chuckle. ‘Really, Adams, gifts for your old master? A generous gesture. But a foolhardy one.’

He signalled to one of his ape stooges, who clubbed Guy down with a blow to the neck.

Kalicum cackled. ‘The thirteenth generation, and the impulse to please his master still just as strong.’ He dropped to his knees and caressed Guy’s cheek with his long fingernails.

‘Yes, he has come to me,’ said Sabbath. ‘All my poor pawns have come to me. And now the time has come at last.’ He turned briskly to his handful of hench-apes. ‘Our business here is done. Clear up and we’ll clear out.’

Perfect, thought Trix, creeping quietly away from the doorway. She’d drag herself off into a dark corner, play dead and wait for this circus to leave town.

Then she’d catch up with Fitz, wherever he was, and –

She froze suddenly, face down to the floor, as light, dancing footsteps approached. Seconds later long fingers pressed against her wrinkled latex neck.

‘Still alive?’ Kalicum’s voice was cold and low in her ear. ‘Splendid.’

‘You wish to take that?’ Sabbath seemed incredulous.

‘A human will be useful. The young man was too badly damaged. I’d barely begun to play before he was dead.’ Kalicum chuckled. ‘After so long waiting, the work on Guy will take mere minutes. A simple mechanical operation. No skill involved. . . No art. . . ’

Trix felt the chill point of a blade behind her ear, bit her lip and screwed her eyes shut as it parted her skin in a graceful spiral down to her neck. He tittered softly and dabbed his finger in the blood she felt seeping from the cut.

‘I’ll show you a piece of work with this one.’

‘So what do we do now?’ Anji wondered, once she and the Doctor had made it back inside the TARDIS.

He was leaning heavily on the console, head thrown back like a conductor in rapture, like he was somehow drawing strength from it. ‘Perhaps the question should be, what are we *supposed* to do now?’

‘Well, then: what are we supposed. . . ?’

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‘It’s like I was saying before. I wonder now if any of us are free agents. The triumph of this reality over all the alternative realities vying for supremacy has allowed for the development of a single, definitive history of events – a chronicle of the web of time from the start of the universe to its eventual destruction.’ He straightened up, flexed his fingers and stretched. ‘And I’m dreadfully worried that some force is using that predictability to its own insidious advantage.’

She met his gaze with a supercilious look of her own. ‘Is that what the wraiths think?’

He nodded, flicked a couple of switches on the console.

‘Sabbath?’

‘The people he’s working for, certainly. The wraiths –’

‘Seems to me you’re putting a lot of faith in these wraith creatures.’ Anji felt the floor shift beneath her as the TARDIS took off. ‘What if they messed with your mind? What if they’re using you?’

‘They have been using me. Now I’ve offered to act for them of my own

volition, not under their influence. I have to, you see.'

'It's what you'll do that worries me,' muttered Anji.

'Yes, me too,' admitted the Doctor, apparently missing her subtext. 'But free will has to triumph. . . or what's living for?'

Anji felt so tired she could weep. 'What are these wraiths, anyway?'

'The last line of defence in the vortex. You know that all sorts of extra-dimensional creatures have been allowed access into the material universe –

since even before the multiverse went into meltdown. And the wraiths, if you like, are a living part of the environment that has supported those creatures.'

'Like the air they breathe?'

'Not really.' He shuddered. 'But I suppose it's as analogous as you can get.'

In any case, that environment they function as a part of is being. . . poisoned.'

'What, like, polluted?'

'Again, roughly analogous.' The Doctor sighed noisily. 'A new presence is infesting the fabric of space-time. A new presence. . . that has been there since the beginning of the universe.'

Anji slumped to the floor in a defeated heap. 'So when you say new, you really mean as old as it's possible to be.'

'Since we're trading rough analogies, I mean loosely speaking that yes, this presence is as old as time itself – but that it wasn't there yesterday.' The Doctor shivered. 'It's resolved itself out of nowhere, and suddenly it's everywhere.'

'And only the wraiths can tell because they're on the outside of creation looking in.' Anji put her head in her hands. 'So how can we reverse it? I assume that's what we've got to do?'

'Chloe and Jamais could take us back there,' said the Doctor. 'They've been there before, when they –'

‘When they saved our lives, stopped the TARDIS breaking up. And when you made your promises.’ Anji realised the contents of her bag were spilling out again. And noticed her phone. ‘God, Stacy’s been trying me about a million times. Do you think she’s found Basalt?’

‘Basalt,’ scoffed the Doctor. ‘He’s the least of our problems now.’

‘But he could get away! Doctor, if it’s going to take another hundred years for the other universes to all cancel out he’ll be able to enjoy the rest of his life somewhere scot-free –’

‘It’s galling, but an unpleasant sideshow, nothing more,’ he snapped. ‘Don’t you see? It’s Sabbath we must find! Whatever he’s scheming it must be close to fruition, and our actions have been serving him and his plans indirectly all along.’ He smashed his fist down on top of the console. ‘And it’s going to stop.’

172

Twenty-seven

Timeless

Stacy woke up a little after half-ten to find Anji’s apartment deserted. There was a fug in the air that spoke of too many sweaty bodies in too small a space with not enough soap. A shower would be heaven right now, she decided.

She padded out in her T-shirt and knickers and found a scrawled note pinned to the bathroom door.

Didn’t want to spoil your dreams with a wake-up call. Gone to warehouse, address on phone pad. We’ll be in touch. Meantime. . . Congratulations/commiserations. You were right.

Fitz

Stacy frowned. He’d scrawled an arrow leading to a pile of papers. She recognised her list of apparent victims on the top, and beneath it was a pile of Guy’s FEPA licences. Some of the names came with helpful translations in blue biro. Jesus. All those doppelgängers, those impossible victims, gone to feed the fishes in the cold grey wash of Basalt’s killing grounds.

‘You were right,’ she told herself. Inside she felt so empty she could almost hear the echo.

So where did that leave her?

Alone, by the look of it.

She suddenly felt desperately homesick for her Brooklyn apartment, for the calm of her office at the facility, for all the things she'd worked so long and hard to attain. But now she had something approaching proof. Wasn't that enough to let her quit all this madness now? To hand the evidence over to the proper channels so that they could investigate, expose, see that justice was done?

Like hell.

What was making her see this through?

Maybe because, when she thought of that calm office of hers, she always saw him there in it with her.

'I need an exorcist,' she muttered, and pushed open the bathroom door. She would have a shower and hit the streets again, try to chase him down. Just thinking about the effort involved made her yawn.

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She found a fresh towel in Anji's airing cupboard and soon figured out how to work the shower. The hot water steamed over her like mist.

And she closed her eyes and started picking her way through a basement apartment. The light didn't work in the hallway, but then there was nothing to see. All the belongings were stored out back. You had to feel your way down a gloomy passage till you came to the windowless bedroom, large and square with thick walls. Throws on the bed that made you *want* to throw, mismatched colours and angular patterns. The TV was set to the listings channel, telling her everything she might watch if her head could just hold on to any of the details long enough.

And he was there again, in the corner, waiting for her. Pulling her to the bed.

The tight bruise of his grip made her feel alive for a moment or two and she fell back unresisting and –

Her eyes snapped back open, but everything was still mist and steam. Stacy moaned and yanked aside the shower curtain.

Basalt was coming at her with a knife.

She shrieked and fell back against cold tiles.

But the nightmare broke for real, then, and there was no one there. She was alone, slumped and sobbing in the steamed-up bathroom.

And just like that she thought of Nencini, alone and helpless in some sizzly apartment somewhere. Basalt had been out late last night, but where? What if he'd realised Trix and Fitz had split and decided to do the job on Nencini himself?

Swearing, she clambered out of the bath and scooped up her clothes. She racked her brains, trying to remember that address Fitz had given for the Italian guy. Come on, he'd been sitting right beside her when he'd said. . .

A gift from elegant Boyard Towers, Streatham.

She hurriedly dressed and grabbed her A to Z. She was used to wasting her time searching wide areas for needles in haystacks. Overweight Italians in a tower block should be a cinch.

Anji ran to escape an explosion of thick dust as the Doctor yanked down another old spring-fastened monitor from the shadows of the control room's high ceiling.

'We need to find the *Jonah*,' he said by way of dubious explanation.

'You think Sabbath's on Earth?'

'Sure of it.' The Doctor hunched myopically over the console and stabbed at a sequence of switches. 'To think we've spent all this time trying to see the bigger picture. . . and all we've seen is a single fragment. A snare to the interest, a mystery to draw us all into our proper positions.'

'Come again?'

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'We've been led by the nose into something as big as the universe itself.' He snorted. 'Sabbath! He fancies himself the great puppet master. He's manipulated us all. And since all his poor players are here, strutting and fretting their final hour upon the stage, I can't imagine he'd want to miss their farewell performance.'

Anji pointed to the monitor. ‘So what’s that for? You think he’s planning a live broadcast or something?’

‘The *Jonah* should be giving off a time signature of sufficient magnitude to be detected. We found Erasmus’s craft easily enough.’

As he flicked a switch, a blast of deafening feedback came from the monitor, nearly knocking Anji off her feet. The Doctor yanked out a patch lead.

‘No good,’ said the Doctor, as he hurled the lead into a dark corner. ‘That’s how we found it easily enough. It’s swamping the systems. Must be very badly shielded. . . ’

‘Maybe it’s decaying,’ said Anji, keeping her hands close to her ears as the Doctor started fiddling with the console again. ‘Gone rotten like their people.

Like their world.’

The Doctor was ignoring her; he’d pressed his ear up close to a black dial like he was a safecracker listening out for the click of tumblers. ‘It’s a long shot, but there’s always a chance the *Jonah*’s emitting radiation on some other frequency. . . ’

But Anji was tiring of deflection tactics. ‘I saw what you were like when Chloe was telling her little tale. And I remember our conversation in the car park. Her people are your people. Her ruined world is the place you come from, isn’t it?’

‘Be quiet,’ the Doctor told her sharply.

‘Why so scared to face up to it, Doctor?’ Anji asked, emboldened by her tiredness. ‘You belong! Erasmus and Chloe travel in time and space like you do, the atmosphere in their ship helps you heal. . . Like them, you’re a survivor of some great cosmic disaster thing. . . ’

‘A survivor,’ breathed the Doctor. ‘Is that how you think of me?’

Anji didn’t say anything, chilled suddenly by the coldness in his eyes. The control room seemed darker somehow, the usual comforting hum sinking to a deeper vibration, almost lost.

‘Spared the fire. . . I don’t survive, Anji. I only endure.’ He shook his head a fraction, set his chestnut curls bobbing. ‘Death has forgotten me.’

‘Will you touch wood, please, Mr Melodrama?’

‘I celebrate life. I defend it, treasure it, preserve it whenever I can. Because. . . because all I can do is feed from it.’ He smiled at her sadly. ‘Perhaps in order to die, you have to truly live. Not muddle by in this patchwork, vampiric existence I cling to.’

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‘You’re not like that,’ said Anji, almost petulantly. ‘You make a difference to people, you. . . ’

‘Yes, quite. Here I am, the proud proponent of free will. Doing all I can to put right the injustices I perceive. While someone, something else has been studying the greater picture and my actions within it. And with all my championing of life. . . ’ He wiped his nose with the back of his hand like a schoolboy. ‘Seems I will prove to be its ultimate betrayer. Chasing round after the threads of a mystery that doesn’t matter any more. Stitched up.’

‘All right, enough,’ Anji told him. ‘Find Sabbath.’

He ignored her, staring into the beady blackness of the monitor screen.

‘Find him! Now!’ she shouted.

He didn’t react.

Anji took a deep breath. ‘Look, Doctor, I can’t argue with you. I can’t fit my thoughts round the size of your reasoning, I’m only human. But I know you can’t just stop now in the middle of all this and mope. You can’t suddenly start worrying that whatever you do, it’s been accounted for already, ready to be used in some meticulously set-up scheme.’

‘Anji,’ he said without turning round, ‘I appreciate your loyalty but you don’t understand –’

‘I don’t understand, you’re absolutely right.’ Anji found she was close to tears without really knowing why. ‘But that’s not going to stop me arguing with you and it’s not going to get me off your back. If people stopped doing stuff just because they didn’t understand it, no one would ever achieve anything, we’d all still be knuckle-grazers living in caves, scratching our backsides and wondering where the sun went every night. So I’m going to keep on hassling you till you snap out of

this, because even if the fates have foretold this little sulk since before the dawn of time, I don't care. All right?

The ensuing silence was only broken when the console gave a loud ping.

A small blob of light flickered on in the ancient monitor.

'I was expecting perhaps a small round of applause after a speech like that,'

said Anji, a little more subdued, 'but I suppose a "ping" will suffice.'

'Interesting,' muttered the Doctor.

'What is?' she asked cautiously.

'This signature response on the screen. It suggests the tiniest glitch in time, almost as if. . . ' He turned back to the console in time to find a small light bulb start winking on and off. 'Aha! Yes. A small pocket of matter nearby has been cauterised from the time stream and is being held in stasis.'

'It has? Gosh.'

'Which sounds to me like some sort of temporal priest hole to hide something precious from wraithlike eyes. . . Something or someone.'

Anji felt her stomach tighten, and felt suddenly sick. 'Guy?'

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'I think Sabbath's got him.' He tapped the glowing blob on the screen. 'So we must get Sabbath! First we find out where the others have got to, and then we get very, very busy.'

She half-smiled. 'Welcome back to the land of the surviving.'

The Doctor placed a small but impeccably formed kiss on the palm of his hand, and blew it over to her. The TARDIS thrummed with sudden energy as he steered her back to Docklands.

Chloe feels her strength fading fast, bound up in the net that knits itself around her and Jamais. It glows with an energy that deadens her senses and his powers. It's to keep them locked here to this place and time. Chloe doesn't need words in a book to tell her that.

So she and Jamais cling together, saving the little strength they have left.

Erasmus sits cross-legged, rocking back and forth beside them. She tries to give him a hopeful smile, but her lips don't want to turn and he's not looking anyway. Two apes who survived the brief but horrible battle hunch over him, their guns pointed at his head.

Guy has been taken away somewhere. Only it's like he's not Guy the most special man in the universe any more. He was just a story. She felt it when he took the diamonds from her pocket, when his icy skin touched hers. Deep down she knows for sure now he's D'Amantine, the thief in France who led her to Sabbath so many years ago.

And the old lady that Chloe only glimpsed has gone too.

'Jamais,' she whispers in his furry ear. 'I think Sabbath will want to leave soon.'

Jamais does not stir. She sighs. She knows what Sabbath wants. She feels for the chain round her neck, but it's gone, snapped in the struggle to get the dead man from her body and fallen somewhere. She fights back the tears.

Maybe someone has found it and picked it up, just as Jamais picked up one of the stones that fell from Sabbath's pocket in France, in 1830.

Sabbath wants her diamonds.

She has more than two thousand of them. One for every person she has saved, and by the same token, one to remember each soul who has slipped away from this alien world, forced to search for space in a heaven that wasn't their own. By thinking hard, by gazing into the perfect depths of their signi-fying stone, Chloe has always believed she can help guide them through the uncertain skies to the shadowlands of Asphodel, where they will forget their pain and dwell forever as peaceful shades.

She knows now her own time will soon be passing.

Sabbath appears, crouches in front of them. His large frame blocks out all else. He talks to her, not Erasmus. Erasmus is a better sulker than she is.

‘Are you comfortable, elemental child?’ he says, his pale eyes probing hers, the harsh lights above shining off his high forehead.

‘I feel dead,’ she mutters sourly.

‘You should be,’ Sabbath assures her. ‘Your kind have had their time, and it is now long since passed. New champions have been selected for the assured safety of the cosmos.’

‘The cosmos is very large,’ says Chloe sullenly. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Very large, yes. But not infinite – and thus manageable, if one starts the job early enough.’

Chloe turns away. She’s bored by him.

‘You’ll take us to your ship,’ he says. ‘That is where you keep the diamonds?’

She says nothing.

‘Please don’t lie.’

He gestures benignly at Erasmus.

‘Or I’ll kill your
guardian.’

She flinches, then nods. ‘That’s where we keep them.’

Sabbath straightens up, towers over her. ‘Kalicum,’ he says simply.

Suddenly Kalicum is there beside him, a skinny white streak of nastiness.

He pulls from his pocket a small black box, and taps his finger against the casing.

Chloe gasps as the net starts to contract, drawing Jamais’s soft bulk closer towards her. The twinkling lights in the links dim a little as the hot metal presses into her flesh. Jamais wakes blearily and starts to whimper, as Sabbath’s thick fingers reach through the net searching out her own. He squeezes her fingertips, but with the net tight around her she feels only a pressure. And she hears Kalicum’s soft, high giggle overhead.

‘Take us there now,’ Sabbath instructs her, and his manner, like his grip, is soft. Chloe does not trust it.

Erasmus turns to her at last, tears in his eyes, and she cannot bear to see them so she lets Jamais take them all away.

Stacy had asked a dozen total strangers and weathered a ton of abuse, but she’d finally narrowed her search for Pietro Nencini to the third storey of Boyard Towers.

She climbed up the stairs, leaning heavily on the metal banister. Now she had to finally face up to the nagging voice in her head that had been asking over and over: what the hell are you going to do if Basalt comes, oh protector-of-the-weak who couldn’t even look after herself if Mr Wong’s on Eastern Parkway shut down?

She checked her cellphone. The batteries were almost flat but she had the Brit emergency number keyed in and ready to send. If she could just get herself inside Nencini’s place, satisfy herself he was OK. . . Sit with him till 178

Fitz or Anji or the Doctor came back into contact. She could watch out for Basalt and, if he arrived, get the cops down here pronto. And one thing she knew for sure – Basalt was not a swift killer. If she could just keep him talking long enough for the cops to catch him in the act. . .

She opened the door that led on to the communal hall. There were four apartments on each level. It wouldn’t take long to find him now.

Especially when one of those apartments had its dowdy front door pushed ajar.

Stacy ducked out of sight, back to the stairwell. Oh God. She checked her phone for the thirtieth time, took a deep breath and walked down the corridor to the door ajar. There was music coming from inside, opera, some scratchy aria on LP by the sound of things.

She put her eye to the crack and tried to see in.

And some enormous weight smashed into the door, slamming it shut and knocking her back with an involuntary shriek.

She heard a man’s voice gabbling in Italian until a loud thunk against the door seemed to stop him. Then the door was flung open.

Basalt stood framed in the doorway, hair dishevelled, wild-eyed, blood

spat-tered over his face and staining his gritted teeth.

He stared at her first in surprise, then in outrage – then like the cat who's got the cream.

'You,' he said hoarsely. 'You found me. Wasn't sure if I gave you enough rope.'

Behind him, collapsed in a dark puddle, was a large man who could only be Nencini. Stacy stared in shock at the body, lying sticky and still.

'Some kind of crazy coincidence, huh?'

'*There's no such thing as chance encounters,*' the Doctor had told her.

'Come inside.' Basalt gave her a sticky red grin. 'Party's just beginning.'

179

Twenty-eight

Stripped away

Basalt lunged for her with big, bloody hands. Stacy kicked out at him but she couldn't stop him grabbing hold of her ankles and hauling her swiftly inside. Her nails raked at the threadbare carpet as she was dragged into the foul-smelling room, the screech of the ancient diva too loud in her ears.

He twisted her round, dropped her face down beside Nencini's prone body.

She fumbled for the phone in her pocket, crawling quickly away to put distance between them, to buy time. The door slammed shut as her fingers closed on the phone.

He brought down the back of his heel on the base of her spine and she collapsed, winded, to the floor.

But he hadn't seen the phone in her hand.

She hit send.

Then she clamped her fist round the smooth plastic shell and held both hands to her ears, hoping Basalt would think she was simply

trying to protect her head. He kicked her in the ribs, and, too shocked to feel anything much, she hoped the snapping sound she heard was her imagination.

Like the stern little voice speaking secretly in her ear over the warbling operatics.

‘The number you have called has not been recognised. . . ’

Stacy tore the phone away from her ear like it was red hot. ‘No!’ she yelled.

She tried to cancel the call, to dial the number again, but Basalt kicked it out of her hand and it fell in the middle of a mountain of pizza boxes. On instinct she tried to crawl after it but he brought something hard down on the back of her head and the world blinked out into flashes of light and darkness.

– his grip on her wrists made her feel alive as he yanked her down to the bed –

She gasped and she shook herself away from the flash of the nightmare.

Basalt had retrieved the phone and was standing behind the pizza boxes, watching her, amused.

He tapped the phone and shook his head, his wild hair waving. ‘That might get you the British emergency services in whatever world you came from. But not here.’

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She stared at him blankly, her nose and her lip throbbing from hitting the floor. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Just like old times, isn’t it?’ whispered Basalt as he dropped the phone and walked slowly towards her. ‘You underneath. Me on top.’

She felt blood leak from her nose into her mouth. The sharp tang on her tongue turned her stomach. Basalt crouched beside her and reached into his pocket, showed her a coin that glinted dull gold. The crackly diva on the turntable hit a suitably hysterical note.

‘So now you kill me, huh?’ she hissed. ‘After so long telling me all about the little things you do, I get to see them for myself, is that it?’

‘Stacy, Stacy,’ he said, placing the coin in Nencini’s bloodied mouth.
‘So good I killed her twice.’

She raised herself on to her elbows, and he turned and grabbed her exposed throat with shaking hands. Her eyes bulged as he tightened his grip and leaned right in. His breath, his odour was rank, overpowering. The bloodspots on his face made strange constellations.

– patterns on the throw, buckling and twisting as he bundled one up into a thick rope and pulled it tight round her neck –

‘It was a real puzzle, wasn’t it? How someone could die so. . . spectacularly. . . and yet still be found doing their stuff over the ocean, or across state. . . even across town.’ His lip curled. ‘I couldn’t believe it when I found just how close you were. We had some good times, you and me, baby. I couldn’t help but come visit the new you.’

She looked at him, her breath rasping, his stink in her lungs, pressure building in her ears. She couldn’t move her arms to fight him off. He was squeezing tears out of her.

‘It was against the rules, of course, but I ain’t never found better than you,’

he whispered, placing his forehead against hers. ‘So soft, so kind. So compli-ant at the back of your nice, quiet, dark little place out in Tappan, with all the little home comforts I’d picked out for you.’

‘What are you saying?’ she croaked.

‘I’m saying how sorry I was when I finally killed you, baby.’ He kissed her tenderly above the eye. ‘When the new you was all set up and ready to go, and the old you had deteriorated so much that, well. . . ’ He chuckled softly.

‘You broke my heart, baby. You didn’t even know it was me, last time we were together.’

– his breath in her ear, his teeth tugging at her lobe as the noose chafed and tightened –

Abruptly he let go of her, backed away. ‘It’s like I said. . . You, Nencini, the whole goddamn lot of them. You all killed yourselves. You made death inevitable. I just made it happen. I have to make things happen, because I’m 182

the one in control. Get it?’ He was growing more and more agitated, his voice rising up to challenge the singing. ‘But no, you don’t. You’ll never see that.

You’re never going to understand.’ Finally he marched up to the crappy music centre and bashed it off the table. The stylus slit the diva’s throat with a long, noisy scratch. The sudden silence made Stacy’s head throb louder. She could hear herself catching noisy breaths, desperate, like they might be the last ones she could grab for.

'I missed you,' he said simply. 'I went to see the new you day after day. You.'

But you didn't know me. You didn't know there used to be so much light in your eyes when you looked at me, or how you used to cling to me in the night when the bad dreams got you in your sleep. . . '

'You're a victim, sweetheart,' she'd sneered at Jacqui. 'That's all.'

'You killed me.' The words dribbled out of her like blood or tears.

'It was your time to go,' he said. 'That happens. Even to the ones we love.'

He looked across at her, his eyes red-rimmed. 'But I chose the moment. I did that for you. Don't you think that's better than leaving it to God, or something?

Than just trusting to fate?'

Her back was pulsing with pain as she tried harder to rise. 'You're insane.'

'I was gonna be leaving this whole damn world,' he complained, his voice suddenly shrill in distress. 'Just like you did. And I was going to be with you again. They said so, Chloe and Erasmus did. They said so. They'd found the perfect set-up for me. My reward. A perfect You.'

He pressed his lips against her neck. She squirmed and finally tore free of his grip. 'Leave me alone!' she warned him.

'Perfect. . . Not the You we've got here now,' he said, his face twisting in contempt. 'Not the feisty, clever-clever You who thinks she's got what it takes to fight me. Uh-uh.' He shook his head. 'The real you. That's what I was going to get. The weak, helpless, scared little You. The one who needs taking in hand.'

'Screw you,' she hissed, her ribs burning, lungs prickling with hot needles.

'The You who'll do whatever I want and just as I say.'

'You sick psycho bastard,' she muttered, spitting blood from her mouth.

'And I was that close to getting it,' said Basalt, snapping his fingers. 'But that's all gone to hell now. So what do you say. . . '

He lunged forwards. Stacy turned and ran for the door but he caught her by her hair and yanked her backwards. She tried to struggle free but he slapped her on her bad ribs, and she almost blacked out with the pain. He held her tight in a half-nelson.

‘How about we make like it’s old times, baby?’ he hissed thickly in her ear, as his free hand snaked under her top.

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Then Nencini’s door smashed wide open and a screaming, wild-eyed madman came tearing inside.

Fitz.

He was running full pelt, arms outstretched. He grabbed Basalt’s head, knocking the killer backwards. Stacy twisted free and fell to one side, but Fitz was going too fast to stop. He and Basalt piled into a big sideboard that collapsed under their sudden attack.

Recovering, Basalt swung a big fist at Fitz, who ducked just in time. The big man swore as he bruised his knuckles on the wall. Fitz jabbed his fingers at Basalt’s eyes but missed and hit his cheek. Basalt’s second blow hit Fitz right in the jaw, smacked his head back against a panel of the fallen sideboard, stunned him. He hit Fitz again, even harder. Fitz brought his arms up feebly over his face, but Basalt swatted them aside, raised his fist again ready to –

Stacy brought a lead-crystal decanter down hard on Basalt’s head.

The decanter didn’t break. The head did.

With a low moan Basalt rolled back, eyes closed, fist still clenched. He collapsed in the splintered shell of the sideboard, a thick trickle of blood bisecting his sweaty face.

Fitz opened one panda eye, and winced. He opened the other instead. ‘Did we get him?’

‘Yeah.’ She sunk painfully to her knees beside him. ‘We got him.’

‘Are you OK?’ Fitz asked, dabbing tenderly at his split lip.

Stacy almost laughed. She said nothing.

‘I’m sorry I took so long,’ he muttered, pushing himself up on one hand. ‘But I’ve been stuck in the boot of Basalt’s car all this time. I hid

there outside the warehouse, see, 'cause we crashed Anji's car and all these bullets were going off and the guards were coming for us. . . ' He was babbling, perhaps in shock.

'I was only going to hide for a minute. Then Basalt drove off and I couldn't get out. And I've lost Guy and I've lost Trix and. . . '

She had no idea what he was talking about. She didn't *care* what he was talking about.

' . . . and then we stopped here and I forced open the boot and I saw where we were, and I guess I'm too late for Nencini—'

'Fitz "Danger" Kreiner,' she said softly, 'do you think you could shut up and just hold me, please?'

With his arms round her it was just a little easier to let the tears come freely, to let it all go.

'Yes,' says Kalicum gloatingly, eyes shining white in the glow of the mountain of diamonds. 'You were right, Sabbath. Why should we waste our own pre-184

cious time and resources stealing diamonds when such a fine selection has been gathered already?'

Sabbath says nothing. He never thinks he's anything else but right.

Chloe, still trapped in the metal web, huddles closer to Jamais and hopes that Erasmus will soon stop just staring at the great gleaming pile of diamonds and think of something to do. She hates strangers seeing her special place, drooling over the diamonds like they are simply jewels and not tiny keepsakes of the lives she has helped make super-special.

Kalicum pushes his hand into the small mountain and wriggles his long fingers. Chloe can tell from his smile he is savouring the cold, scratching sensation of the gems grinding against his skin. Jamais growls, bares his ivory teeth, but she shushes him. She reminds herself that the stones can't feel. It's just stories that they can contain the splinter of a star or the cell of a soul.

They are old, dead things. Their magic is in the mind, and the memory.

'Diamonds,' says Sabbath. 'The least tainted substance in all nature.'

He surveys his haul and feels pleased. 'The oldest stones here date back some seventeen hundred million years. . . ' He gives a brilliant smile to Chloe. 'Few things can endure so long and remain entirely pure.'

'Purity, yes. . . ' Now Kalicum takes up the rapture. 'And strength. The hardest natural material in the universe, and the most elegantly designed.'

He lets fall a shower of the stones from his hand. 'But many of these stones will be useless for our purposes.'

Sabbath delves in near the base of the mountain and pulls out a handful of large, misshapen, dull stones. 'Of course, we could cut these older, rough stones should it –'

'There is no "we" in this matter,' snaps Kalicum. 'Do not seek to advise me.'

Sabbath reacts as if stung. His face darkens: 'Have a care, Kalicum,' he says in a voice that makes Chloe shiver.

Kalicum smiles by way of apology. 'Forgive me, my friend – my partner – but you know my expertise in this matter cannot be matched.' He kicks Jamais with the pointed toe of his spotless boot. 'Would you have a dog and bark yourself?'

Sabbath considers the skinny man before him. His great shaven head nods almost imperceptibly. 'Then make the selection. I wish to begin the final phase.' He sinks his hands into the pockets of his greatcoat, and Chloe can see the lines of weariness that score his broad face. 'It has been so long a journey.'

'Indeed. The culmination of all our plans,' agrees Kalicum, steeping his fingers together and smiling slyly.

'But the journey is not yet over. You, Erasmus –' Sabbath slaps one meaty hand down on his shoulder – 'you will take me to the control area of your ship. There is a feat of elemental engineering I would have you accomplish

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on my behalf.' And at last, he looks down at Chloe, crushed up together with Jamais. 'And you two, rest yourselves. I have more labours in wait for you before your usefulness expires. Before the great task is done.'

He herds Erasmus unprotesting from the room. Chloe shuts her eyes and clings to Jamais while Kalicum sorts through the diamonds, scrutinising them, testing them, tasting them, building up his own miniature mountain of gemstones, stripping away the love and the sentiment about them until there is only harsh rock and the cold light it reflects.

Over the sound of Stacy breathing in his ear, and Basalt's rattling breaths beside him, Fitz thought he could hear the grating engines of the TARDIS

outside.

'D'you hear that?' he whispered to Stacy. Her salty tears were stinging the messy cut on his cheek from Basalt's blow. 'I think it's the Doctor coming.'

'Too late for the explanations this time.' Stacy gave a snotty chuckle. 'I heard it straight from the bastard's mouth.'

'Heard what?'

She pulled back a little way, stared at him oddly with swollen eyes. 'It all adds up,' she said wretchedly. 'The dreams. The weird little things I misre-membered. . . '

'Take it easy, Stacy.'

'No, listen. . . ' She shrugged. 'I'm one of them. Basalt's victims. One of the duplicates.'

Fitz's eyes widened, and made his cheek sting like hell. 'What?'

'That's what he said.' She looked down at the floor. 'That's why he came to me in the first place, told me what he was doing. He got a taste for the stuff he did to that other me.'

Fitz didn't know what to say, so he just wound up staring. She looked down at her knees, her back turned to Basalt's prone body. Tracy Marlowe popped unbidden into his head: a name from the licence list.

But then Stacy's mobile piped into unmusical life. She made no move to answer it, so Fitz gently disengaged himself and answered. 'Yes?'

'Fitz, it's Anji.'

'Oh, thank God! Is the Doctor with you?'

‘Just about.’

‘Only I just heard the sound of – Never mind.’ He took Stacy’s limp hand and gave it a comforting squeeze. ‘Listen, everything’s been kicking off here, Guy and Trix are –’

‘Fitz, stay calm, we’ll be there in a few moments. Just tell me where you are.’

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‘Seventy-two Boyard Towers, Streatham,’ he said. ‘Nencini’s place.’ He heard Anji relay the information across to the Doctor. ‘Uh, Anji?’

‘The Doctor says hang up. Fast.’

The phone went dead just as the Doctor and Anji burst into the wrecked flat. ‘Not a second to lose,’ the Doctor explained. ‘And we don’t want any more paradoxes, do we? Now the TARDIS is back on home turf, she loves showing off with these short hops. . . ’

Finally he seemed to take in what must’ve happened in the little flat, and shut up. Anji put her hand to her mouth, staring around. The Doctor simply ran across to where Fitz and Stacy were kneeling, dropped down and threw his arms round them both. His velvet sleeve tickled Fitz’s nose.

‘Home turf,’ said Stacy through a mouthful of the Doctor’s lapel, adding oddly: ‘Where they don’t call eight-triple-eight for the cops.’

He squeezed her a little more tightly and Fitz heard her wince. ‘She’s hurt, Doctor.’

The Doctor peered at his face. ‘And so are you.’

‘Looks like a bomb went off in here,’ said Anji, shakily.

‘Nope. Basalt.’ He gestured at the gory bulk of the snoring killer. ‘And now the only thing going off is Nencini. We were too late.’ He frowned. ‘Name me a famous Marlowe.’

‘Christopher,’ said Anji distantly.

‘Philip,’ the Doctor volunteered.

‘American detective.’ Fitz nodded sadly. ‘And Tracy like Stacy. It’s there on the environmental licence. . . Tracy Marlowe. Stacy Phillips.’

He tried to take Stacy's hand but she was hugging herself now and shaking with sobs. 'Funny, Mike,' he muttered. 'Really funny.' He turned to Anji. 'Call an ambulance.'

Anji already had out her phone. 'And the police.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor, getting to his feet. 'They'll deal with this better than we could.' He peered at Basalt with detached interest. 'So that's him, is it?'

No one spoke except Anji, who'd got through to the emergency operator: 'I need to report a murder. . . '

'How many murders. . . ?' The Doctor tutted. 'The full record of his crimes may never come to light. I wonder what petty punishments your legal system will devise for what he's done.'

'He'll get life for Nencini,' said Fitz. 'The fella's a stiff, no matter how duplicated he is. And attempted homicide on Stacy. . . '

Anji had sat down beside Stacy, trying to ascertain how bad she was, presumably on the operator's instruction. 'Yes. . . a Caucasian female. Her name is Stacy Phillips, and she has. . . broken ribs? I think they're broken.'

Stacy was staring at the smashed record player on the floor. 'And maybe one or two internal injuries,' she added softly.

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'There's a man too, the killer. He's very dangerous. Daniel Basalt, he's currently. . . unconscious. Yes, also wounded. . . ' She looked at the Doctor and mouthed: 'What's wrong with him?'

'A fractured skull, by the looks of things,' the Doctor reported. 'Oh, and there's some nasty abdominal bruising, just here.'

So saying, he booted Basalt full-force in the guts.

Basalt didn't stir as he rolled a little deeper into the wreckage of the trashed sideboard.

'Come on,' the Doctor said, a disgusted look on his face – though whether at Basalt or himself, Fitz couldn't quite decide. 'Finish that call, Anji. It's time to leave.'

'And Doctor, I have to tell you about Trix,' Fitz fretted. 'She's missing,

and. . .

Sabbath's got Guy.'

'Guy?' Anji raised her eyebrows. 'Is he OK?'

The Doctor looked keen to get off. 'We can trade information in the TARDIS.'

'How about you, Stacy?' said Fitz gently.

'I'm staying here. Got a date with a paramedic.'

'You'll be all right alone with. . . ' He gestured awkwardly behind her.

Stacy glanced back briefly at Basalt. 'Sure.' She shrugged again. 'Seems being alone with him is nothing new.'

Fitz got back up. Anji gave him a squeeze on the shoulder, and he was grateful for it.

'Doctor?' Stacy asked without looking round at him. 'Did you know this about me. . . all along?'

'No,' he told her. 'I only knew you were a part of whatever was going on.'

Like Guy. Like the white van and the crew of *Prometheus*.'

'But you understand now,' said Stacy calmly. 'And you'll come back, won't you? You'll explain it to me.'

'Yes. I will.'

Then he turned and left. After a moment's hesitation, Anji followed him.

Fitz groped around for something warm or wise that might be a crumb of comfort to her. Finding nothing, he walked off after the others.

Stacy didn't look up.

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Twenty-nine

Premiere

Trix woke in a room that was brilliant white, with no doors or windows.

The back of her neck was stinging, but luckily for her and her latex disguise, the incision had not been deep. She guessed that Kalicum's blade had been drugged or something, so he'd be spared an old lady's hysteria until he was in a position to properly enjoy it.

She frowned as she looked about. The whiteness was bright but didn't hurt her eyes. And she could see something else now, forming out of a blur of light: Guy, on his knees, some distance away.

'Hey,' she hissed. 'Young man! It's me, an innocent bystander of pensionable age. Can you hear me?'

Guy opened his eyes. 'Who're you?' he murmured.

'Er, good, thanks,' she said in a suitably dishevelled voice in case they were being overheard. 'How's *tricks* with you?'

His eyes showed that he'd got it. 'Where are we?'

'Locked up somewhere, isn't it obvious? More to the point,' she hissed, 'what were you doing before, acting like Sabbath's zombie lapdog?'

'God,' he said as if suddenly remembering. 'That was so weird. It's like someone walked over my grave. I knew those two. Especially the skinny one.'

I knew them so clearly, like they were old mates, or colleagues. Or, like. . .

family.'

'Christmas must be fun round your place,' she grumbled.

'But the thing is,' he went on nervously. 'I've never seen either of them before in my life.'

'Lucky you,' said Trix. 'But I have a hunch that piece of good fortune is about to change.'

It was weird, staring round into the white void. She kept catching glassy glitterings of light reflected at strange angles. It put her in mind of the glare of the diamonds she'd poured into Fitz's hand, the way they had caught the light before he'd passed them to Basalt as if

signalling to her. Beckoning her to look deep inside.

And she felt deep inside now. Like it was diamond that held them here, trapped and powerless, waiting and wondering what would come next.

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* * *

‘There it is,’ said Fitz, pointing to the silvery sheen beneath the scummy surface of the River Colne.

‘The *Jonah*,’ proclaimed the Doctor.

‘Conveniently parked so he could sneak into our friendly neighbourhood psychotic’s warehouse,’ added Anji.

The TARDIS had put them down in the overgrown grounds of Basalt’s base.

They’d looked inside but there was no one there, not one solitary body, human or ape. Fitz hoped that meant that Trix and Guy were still alive somewhere.

And at least concern for Guy seemed to be keeping Anji’s mind off the state of her trashed motor. (‘I’m not sure my cover extends to Acts of Total Prat,’ was her only dispirited comment.)

The Doctor turned to Fitz, looking thoughtful. ‘And you’re sure Chloe, Jamais and Erasmus were here?’

He nodded. ‘Sabbath and his guard apes were all around them.’

‘Chloe said they were meant to meet Basalt, remember?’ said Anji. ‘And he led them into a trap.’

‘Maybe not willingly. Sabbath seemed to be after Basalt too,’ Fitz told them.

‘Not that I’m sticking up for the git.’

‘So what do we think?’ the Doctor mused. ‘Is Sabbath holding our Timeless friends on the *Jonah*?’

‘If he is, why is the *Jonah* still moored here?’ wondered Anji.

‘Precisely,’ said the Doctor. ‘So Sabbath has business elsewhere.’

‘Which means he’s not on board the *Jonah*,’ said Fitz.

The Doctor grinned at them. ‘Which will make it easier for us to sneak aboard.’

Anji sighed. ‘So what do we do? Go paddling and hope he’s left the door open?’

‘And that his apes are all out water-skiing?’ Fitz added.

The Doctor nodded cheerfully. ‘Why not? I’m sure they could certainly use a distraction.’

‘And I could use some raw steak,’ Fitz said, unable to resist touching the tender bruises on his face.

‘At least your nose wasn’t hurt this time,’ said the Doctor.

‘Eh?’

‘Remember I bumped it when I opened the door and –’

Fitz rolled his eyes at Anji. ‘God, Doctor, that was ages ago! That was in another life!’

‘In another universe,’ Anji agreed.

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The Doctor looked surprised. Then a slow smile spread over his face. ‘But a permanent record remains. . .’ He clapped Fitz on the back. ‘That film of yours. Shall we arrange the premiere?’

‘This is insulting,’ Fitz grumbled, as the Doctor fiddled with wires and connectors he’d attached to his little camcorder; Anji had transferred the partly edited footage of *These Islands Earth* to one of the dinky little tapes ready for showing. ‘I was planning a huge celebrity launch at the Odeon in Leicester Square. . . glitz and champagne. . . all the press turning out. . . and what opening does my magnum opus receive instead?’ He sighed. ‘A diversion for a bunch of apes.’

‘Still an audience,’ argued Anji. ‘Just their monkey suits are a little closer to the real thing.’

‘Ha, ha.’ He noticed the Doctor was looking transfixed at the little

movie screen built into the camcorder. ‘Pretty good stuff, isn’t it?’

‘I wonder what happened to Trix,’ he said, his voice distant and grave.

‘I get the feeling she can take care of herself,’ said Anji. ‘But Guy. . .’

‘We’ll find them,’ the Doctor told them.

‘But in how many pieces?’ said Fitz darkly.

The Doctor was glued to the little screen. ‘All those dead worlds and dead futures,’ he muttered. ‘Now there’s just one, only one. Let’s do our best for it, shall we?’ The Doctor flicked a couple of switches on the console. ‘I’m going to try to land inside the *Jonah*.’

‘What happened to stealth?’ complained Fitz. ‘The noise the TARDIS makes, the apes in London Zoo will hear us coming.’

‘Good,’ announced the Doctor.

Fitz had his back pressed up hard against the gleaming wall of the side-corridor. Large round rivets pressed into his spine and his whole body shook with the huge, whooshing heart-beat rhythm of the *Jonah*’s arcane engines.

Sabbath’s apes heard the commotion of the TARDIS’s arrival in the hold just as Fitz had predicted. Three of the massive, uniformed creatures had come shambling to investigate, grunting and chattering and baring their teeth in warning yawns. While they were scary buggers and no mistake, there was also something a touch sad about the creatures – so out of place in the dull lustre of the metallised passageways. . .

They reached the hold. The two gorillas charged in, beating their fists against their chests like they’d spotted Tarzan inside, while the third ape, which looked like an orang-utan, barred the doorway by spreading both arms wide out. A thick canopy of reddish-brown arm hair hung down from a long slit in his sleeves, like the beast was wearing a furry cape beneath its jacket.

Fitz held his breath as tightly as the gun in his hand. It was loaded with tranquilliser darts, but the Doctor had said not to use them until it was absolutely necessary – he didn’t know how long the apes would stay knocked out for and he needed as much time as possible to get a

handle on Sabbath's plans. But would the little camcorder attract their attention? Wouldn't they just smash it and go back to searching the *Jonah*?

He wished the Doctor had been able to find more than three darts.

The gorillas weren't happy. They could hear a tinny voice blaring out but couldn't work out the source. With a nervous hoot one silverback pointed to up on the TARDIS's roof. The other swiped the camcorder to the floor. Well spotted, thought Fitz, the gun metal slippery in his fist.

But the film kept playing. 'Ha! Ha! Ha!' Trix – where the hell was she?

– was doing her Sabbath impersonation now. 'Working as I am for unspecified higher powers, the nature of my misguided plans remains frustratingly obscure, ha ha!'

The impression was better than he remembered. The apes seemed to recognise it, anyway; they backed away from the noisy little machine warily.

'The universe can take a few lumps!

My masters want a single uni-

verse – none of this "a-new-universe-is-born-every-time-a-decision-is-made"

rubbish. . . '

The orang-utan dropped its arms from blocking the doorway and took a couple of fascinated steps towards the camcorder.

'The preview audience were engrossed, and truly impressed by the depth and insight Kreiner brought to his work,' breathed Fitz, keeping the gun trained on the orang-utan and praying none of them looked his way.

Anji followed the Doctor along the cramped passageways of Sabbath's ship.

She wondered if Jules Verne had ever seen the *Jonah* and ripped it off for his *Nautilus*. The claustrophobic narrowness of the corridors, the dim lighting, the steamy hissings of the internal workings all aided the illusion that they were easily twenty-thousand leagues under the sea,

not just beneath the surface of a lazy river outside Greater London.

The Doctor stopped abruptly, peered through a circular window set into one studded door. 'Look here.'

'Get out of the way then,' Anji hissed. He obliged and she saw through the thick glass what looked like a giant cigar tube, grey and lustreless. 'What is it? A missile?'

'Let's have a look.'

He spun a spiked brass wheel set into a neighbouring wall panel. There was a hiss of compressed air and the door jumped open with a dull clang. Anji 192

looked round anxiously, convinced that a party of apes would come bounding towards them at any moment. But nothing came looking.

As Anji took a cautious step inside, she felt suddenly faint. A crack seemed to go up her spine, and her vision darkened. She was about to cry out when the feeling passed.

'What was that?' she said nervously. 'Booby trap?'

The Doctor had clearly felt it too. 'I'm not sure.'

There was a ringing silence in Anji's ears. She realised that the weird rumbling echoes of the ship systems had stopped. 'What's happened?'

'Remember we detected a portion of the *Jonah* being held in temporal stasis?' He gestured round the small chamber that housed the capsule. There was barely room either side for a single person to examine it. 'Here we are.'

Caught up in a pocket dimension dislocated from the real world outside.'

'Can we get back out as easily as we came in?'

'Oh, I would think so. Whatever's in this capsule, I'm sure Sabbath will wish to use it in the real world.'

'It's man-sized,' Anji observed.

The Doctor tapped his knuckle against it. 'Dwarf star alloy,' he decided. 'Unbelievably heavy. I suppose that storing it in hyperspace obviates the weight problems a vessel like the *Jonah* would experience

trying to ferry it about.

And of course, keeps the contents entirely stable, mindless of whatever's happening in the wider world.'

'How did this tube get in here if it's so heavy?'

'Matter transporter?'

The Doctor was looking now at a small console

mounted on a wheeled platform at the far end of the room. The main panel bristled irresistibly with controls, and before Anji could protest the Doctor had tweaked a couple.

There was a deep clang of metal and the smooth brass wall behind the console split suddenly down the middle and sprang apart a few inches. The two segments contracted until they had vanished entirely, and Anji found she was viewing what she imagined the crash room at Holby City might've looked like if designed by M.C. Escher.

At first glance it was simply a large, white-tiled room, but so gleaming bright your eye was drawn straight back for a second look. The dimensions of the theatre were somehow wrong, corners pinched and extruded, improbable machines dotted about in impossible alcoves. And two huge crystalline boxes of light floated in the right-hand space of the bizarre room.

Guy was held helpless in one, old-lady-Trix in another, mouths moving in silence, staring around blindly at their surroundings.

* * *

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'Hello! I'm the Doctor, a man of mercurial moods and wanderer in the fourth dimension of space and time!'

This particular weapon in Trix's arsenal of impressions was clearly too much for the apes to stand. The orang-utan screeched and hand-swiped the camcorder into a far corner of the hold, whereupon it delivered an echoing clang of protest.

As the echoes faded into silence Fitz realised that the little machine was kaput.

'Tragically, projector difficulties brought an untimely end to the

screening,’

muttered Fitz as his finger curled round the slick trigger of the gun.

The apes stood motionless, staring after the camcorder, jaws gaping open as if daring it to start up again.

Then, satisfied any danger had passed, they turned.

And saw Fitz, pressed pancake-flat against the wall of the narrow access corridor, gripping his gun.

The orang-utan roared, its throat pouch billowing, and went for him. Fitz fired the gun. A little arrow shot into the beast’s shoulder, and with a shriek of surprise, the orang-utan jumped backwards, knocking into the two gorillas.

Fitz Kreiner, big game hunter, had bagged his first trophy. But there was no time to enjoy his victory. Taking careful aim he fired again, at the biggest of the two silverbacks.

The dart pranged off the steel wall and bounced uselessly into the hold.

With an angry bark the intended target dragged its partner aside so that it might reach Fitz first.

Deciding there was still less time to lament his failure, Fitz ran for it.

The corridors were so narrow the apes could only pursue him in single file.

Their footfalls rocked and pounded at the metal floors. Fitz glanced behind him to check their distance – way too close – and so failed to see the steel ladder built close to the wall ahead of him. He caught his foot and was sent sprawling. The gun was jarred from his grip and clattered down the corridor.

He turned himself on to his back.

The gorilla he’d shot at now skidded to a heavy halt. Its beady eyes were fixed on him in an evil stare; its mouth was open and drooling. Behind it stood its mate, massive head swinging from side to side as it tried to get a clear look at the dead meat blocking its master’s corridor.

The first ape broke into a lumbering charge.

Then the *Jonah* rocked and shook, and a deep vibration started up. Fitz's teeth fair rattled in his skull. The first gorilla stalled its charge, stared round wildly, barking in alarm. The other clutched its huge head, wide nostrils flaring, mouth wide open baring its terrifying fangs.

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While the beasts panicked, Fitz pushed himself backwards with his feet, grabbed his gun with shaking hands. He slid out of sight as the vibration began to subside – and as a reverberating clang shook around the *Jonah*.

Something was coming inside.

Anji tore her tortured gaze away from Guy and Trix to face the Doctor. 'How do we get them out of there?'

'The same way they were brought here,' he murmured, but the small spark of hope that allowed her was swiftly snuffed out. 'If only I knew what it was.'

Suddenly the bright room became almost blinding. A square blur of light dazzled Anji, and behind it a craggy anthill form began to shift into clear focus.

Her jaw dropped open. In a new cell, hovering beside Guy's and twinkling with rainbow light, was the biggest pile of diamonds Anji had ever seen.

'Where'd that come from?'

'Matter transmitter,' said the Doctor, 'as I thought.' He was beaming at the bank of controls as if they were more alluring than the gemstones. 'There's a slave relay in operation. This must work in tandem with a twin-console located presumably somewhere nearby.'

'Closer than you think, Doctor.'

Sabbath had entered the room behind them. He looked livid. And crowding in the doorway were two apes.

Fitz stood in the shadows outside an impressively large hatchway he suspected led into the *Jonah's* flight deck. He'd soon realised the clanging sound had been the opening of the hatchway leading to the surface. Sabbath had come stamping down and spoken harshly to his

cringing apes; he had a right cob on, accusing them of mismanaging the controls and causing interference. There was silence for a while – could the apes use sign language or something? –

and then he'd led them away into the guts of the ship. Fitz's own guts were churning with the closeness of his simian call.

What to do now? He'd lost Trix and Guy, he didn't want the Doctor and Anji to go the same way. But equally he knew Sabbath couldn't fail to see the TARDIS in the hold as he walked by. He would know the Doctor was loose on his ship, and Fitz would doubtless have to launch a one-man rescue mission.

Fab.

One thing was for sure: he'd need more of an arsenal than this crumbly dart gun. He remembered the gun Guy had left in the MG when he'd gone out and done his trance number on Sabbath and friends. If he could retrieve that he'd pose a more credible threat to man and ape alike.

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Fitz nipped back down the passage then, legs and arms trembling, he scaled the conning ladder. He wrestled with the steam-powered mechanism that unlocked the hatch, praying that the *Jonah* hadn't descended far beneath the surface without him realising. Finally, up it swung.

He popped his head up and frowned. He was not outside. And the *Jonah* was not in the drink. Perhaps he was dreaming.

The craft was filling most of a large bare room; all it needed were a few ropes to keep out stray punters and it could've been an exhibit in a particularly demented museum. Daylight poured into the room through three large, circular windows set in one wall.

And there, covered in a thick, glowing wire mesh, was a mish-mash of limbs and long faces. Once his eyes had performed some minor acrobatics Fitz worked out he was looking at some right miserable-looking geezer, a little blonde-haired girl and her pet mongrel: Erasmus, Chloe and Jamais the wonder-hound, all trussed up together.

He carefully climbed down some slippery wet rungs set into the side of the craft. 'Who did this to you?' The question was aimed at Erasmus, but the big man's mouth stayed shut tighter than a camel's

backside in a sandstorm.

‘Sabbath,’ said Chloe. ‘He forced Erasmus to materialise our ship around the *Jonah*, then trapped him in here with us.’

‘This is a ship?’

‘But something went wrong.’

‘I felt it,’ said Fitz with conviction, descending the last few algaed rungs.

‘Our home won’t move. It’s been broken by something in there.’ Chloe pointed at the *Jonah*. ‘Sabbath’s gone to find out what’s wrong. And I think you’d better hide. Kalicum’s transported the diamonds he needs. He’ll be –’

There came the sound of a man’s voice, clipped and terse, followed by the click of a door shutting, close by.

‘– back?’ concluded Fitz, as he jumped over Chloe’s head and crouched in a tight ball behind them. He watched as a skinny bloke with a big bonce minced inside wheeling along some weird control panel like it was a hostess trolley. He abandoned it beside the *Jonah* and scaled the wet rungs with obvious distaste. And when he reached the top he produced some kind of cool-looking ray gun. Expecting trouble, or out to cause some of his own.

‘That’s Sabbath’s mate, is it?’ hissed Fitz.

Chloe shook her head. ‘I don’t think he’s friends with anyone. But –’ She breathed in sharply. ‘Oh no.’

Fitz rubbed his eyes, they seemed oddly blurry. ‘What’s up?’

‘The wraiths,’ she muttered, and started shaking the dark bulk of her dog.

‘Jamais! You must wake up!’ The dog’s ear was pressed down flat to his head, so Chloe pulled it up and spoke into it. ‘The wraiths are here!’

196

Fitz found his misted vision seemed to clear so long as he stared only at the tranquilliser gun. Why should that be?

‘They want to kill us,’ said Chloe. ‘We’re all in danger!’

Fitz found he was raising the gun, found the mists were parting around the sleeping animal. He found he could see every hair on Jamais’s head, every fleck of grey in his muzzle.

‘No, please!’

Found he was pointing the gun through the mesh and right up against the beast’s black shiny head.

‘Move away from the control panel, Miss Kapoor,’ said Sabbath with a mild-ness that belied the look of fury on his puffy face.

‘Or you’ll do what?’ Anji retorted, gesturing at the cramped confines of the room. ‘Come closer and give me claustrophobia?’

‘My apes may give you a good deal more,’ he said gently.

Anji moved reluctantly aside. She saw a red light was blinking at the lower right of the panel. ‘What have you done with Fitz?’

‘Fitz?’ Sabbath’s face clouded with puzzled irritation.

‘Don’t be silly, Anji, he’ll still be safe in the TARDIS.’ The Doctor gave her a meaningful look, and she nodded.

‘Doctor, answer the signal,’ Sabbath said impatiently.

The Doctor shrugged and hit a switch.

‘Kalicum, the diamonds have transferred successfully,’ Sabbath reported.

‘Now get down here. With your gun.’

‘Understood,’ purred a smooth, clear voice from some hidden speaker.

‘Any other secretarial chores I can help you with?’ the Doctor enquired.

Sabbath beckoned with one thick finger. ‘Stand before me. Here. Now.’

‘Sorry,’ the Doctor grinned, keeping his distance. ‘I’m not very good at taking dictation.’

Sabbath didn't smile. 'The arrival of your antiquated, anomalous ship has caused me difficulties, Doctor.'

'Antiquated and anomalous?' The Doctor tutted. 'People in glass houses, Sabbath. . . ' He gestured at the glinting angles of the mysterious room next door. 'And indeed, crystalline ones, for that matter. What's this place for?'

'I've had Erasmus move his own elemental time ship around the *Jonah*,' Sabbath announced, ignoring him, 'and it seems now its systems will not function effectively.'

'Ah, yes, my TARDIS will have caused a gravity bubble, I'm afraid.' The Doctor shook his head and blew out through pursed lips. 'Dimensional regression will have distorted all systems, main drives will be sluggish. . . the situation will resolve itself only if I remove my ship.'

197

'Which means you can't kill us,' said Anji with relief.

'So why not release my friends from these crystal cages and we can discuss a way forward?'

'Regrettably, Kalicum has not yet finished with them.'

'Talk to me, Sabbath.' The Doctor took a step closer, and one of the apes let out a low growl. 'Why take Guy? What do you need him for?'

Sabbath shrugged, clearly amused. 'Hundreds of years ago we took a random specimen, a Frenchman called D'Amantine, and infected his RNA with a specific protein structure that could be passed on hereditarily. . . Over thirteen generations his chromosomes have been successively mutated to our design.'

'Along with his surname,' said Anji. Then she whispered to the Doctor:

'Augmented DNA. That's what you picked up when you gave Guy his physical.'

But the Doctor ignored her. ' *Our* design?'

'Oh, modesty forbids I take sole credit for such manipulations. I have had help, of course, just as I have been assisted in the trammelling of random chance so that all my players may be brought together with

such elegance, such economy.’ His eyes gleamed with good humour. ‘Your misdirected enthusiasm in solving the mystery of Timeless has conveniently manoeuvred everyone I need straight into my arms. Proof that a most bright future is indeed ordained.’

‘Or proof that you’re just a lazy get,’ the Doctor retorted.

‘Our plan spans the centuries. Now finally I have brought it to pass.’

‘But brought what, exactly? What is Guy’s genetic inheritance designed to bring about?’

‘Enough of this. Remove your ridiculous ship from the *Jonah* and be thank-ful I let you live on.’

The Doctor raised his voice. ‘I’m waiting, Sabbath.’

Sabbath sighed wearily, as if vexed by some tiresome child. ‘D’Amantine’s thirteenth male descendent has been primed to convey a most precious cargo.’

Anji glanced over at the glittering mountain of jewels. ‘The diamonds?’

Sabbath smiled thinly. ‘Something more precious still shall be grown inside them. The boy has become a genetic key, one that will unlock the potential incubated within the gemstones. . . ’ Sabbath steepled his fingers. ‘And my employers will have at last succeeded in their ambitions.’

‘I know why you need the drives of Erasmus’s ship fully operational. And why you need the power of Chloe and Jamais to charge it.’ The Doctor marched round the casket and squared up to Sabbath. ‘You’re going back to a point in time before the creation of the universe.’

If Sabbath was surprised he’d been rumbled, he didn’t show it. ‘I instigated the collapse of the multiverse. You wrested a single, finite reality from the resultant chaos. The cosmos has been born anew. The gaps and glitches in 198

the fabric of space and time watched over by the likes of you and Erasmus have been ironed out in the rebirth.’ He nodded in satisfaction, unable to keep the zeal from his voice any longer. ‘And now the people of Earth shall inherit the mantle of your kind. Time and space must be governed, Doctor, properly regulated. You of all people must understand that.’

The Doctor stared at him. He seemed suddenly rattled.

‘And you have been the catalyst, Doctor. You’ve made it all possible.’

Suddenly a tall, spindly man weaved through the apes and insinuated himself beside Sabbath. His egg-shaped head was so large it seemed to sway about on his shoulders like a smug balloon.

‘Mr Kalicum, I presume,’ said the Doctor darkly.

Kalicum’s eyes narrowed. ‘Have they meddled, interfered with anything?’

‘Our systems are intact,’ Sabbath said smoothly. ‘The Doctor is now going to remove his time ship so that we might be on our way. Or you will shoot his companion.’

‘Harm her in the slightest and I’m not budging at all,’ said the Doctor firmly.

‘Release Guy, release Trix, and I’ll leave you well alone, believe me.’

‘The boy is essential to our plans, you know that,’ said Sabbath patiently.

‘You want the old woman?’ Anji caught a spark of realisation in his black, beady eyes. ‘Of course, I should’ve realised. The woman is known to you. If it will expedite your departure then, yes, you may take her.’

‘He may not,’ said Kalicum firmly. ‘I still need her.’

Sabbath turned on him. ‘I know this fool. He will sacrifice himself before he sees the woman come to harm. Your vulgar playing with knives can wait.’

‘I have convinced you of my inane nature well, I see.’

‘So come. We have business we must attend to.’

‘Indeed,’ said Kalicum. ‘And I will not tolerate any further delays. I took the woman so that I might dispose of you all the sooner.’

So saying he pulled a gun from his pocket and levelled it at Sabbath’s head.

The courage to stand alone

Fitz was going to pull the trigger, send the dart smacking through the skull and into Doggy's brain. It was the only clear course of action. A million voices inside him were begging him to do it. They shot horses, didn't they?

Why was the little girl screaming louder than anything else?

Then suddenly the animal squirmed within the net, knocked its head up and under the gun like a performing seal and sent it flying. Jamais gave a roar that put Sabbath's apes to shame, opened his mouth, and started to snap and suck at the wraith-creatures smothering them like steam.

For that was what the mist had become: alive with shadowy creatures.

Suddenly Fitz was afraid, his skin was cold and wet like a freezing fog had descended. He curled up into a ball.

When he opened his eyes just a couple of moments later, it seemed to be over. There was an odd reek in the chilly air, a something's-gone-off-in-the-back-of-the-fridge sort of smell. And Jamais was writhing in the metal net like he'd swallowed a box of tintacks. Chloe was squeezing her arms round his dark neck, tears falling down her face.

'They never attacked like that before,' she sobbed.

'They're desperate,' said Erasmus at last. His voice was cracked and hoarse, like he'd snaffled one or two of the tintacks himself. 'They've not just been trying to stop us passing through to the Other Places. . . They've been trying to change our course. To stop us doing the bidding of these creatures who hold us now. To lead us from ruination.'

Fitz looked at him uncertainly. 'By killing you?'

He glared back at Fitz. 'It's their only choice now. You should've done as they wished. Killed the animal.'

'It's only a tranquilliser –'

'Fired at close range, the metal point will pierce his skull and enter the brain,' snapped Erasmus. Chloe burst into tears, and he shut his eyes.

‘We sought only to help people. Why must there always be consequences? Why is it not enough simply to do good things?’

Fitz couldn’t answer him.

201

‘But we don’t even know what it is we’re going to do that has to be stopped!’

said Chloe miserably.

‘It will change everything,’ rasped Erasmus. ‘Everything. That much we do know.’

‘I don’t care about everything,’ wailed Chloe. ‘I care about the people I love.’

‘Fetch me the gun,’ Erasmus told Fitz shakily, ‘and I will do the job myself.’

‘No!’ squealed Chloe.

‘Fetch me the gun!’

‘I’m with her,’ Fitz told him. ‘If we can get the Doctor out of there, he might still be able to sort out this mess. . . ’ But did he really think that was true?

He’d seen the Doctor win sometimes by the most terrible means. When it came down to it, that stark choice between ending a life and saving billions more, he had never shirked from bloodying his hands. Now everyone in the room was crying, everything depended on Fitz, and he was paralysed with doubt. Why? It was the life of some overgrown Labrador against the entire universe.

‘The wraith creatures are exhausted and spent,’ whispered Erasmus. ‘I felt it. They will not come again. It is over. And it is over for us too, Chloe, and our pilgrimage. Our dreams of making a difference. The Blessed Destroyer of our world had the courage of his convictions and the strength to act, and. . .

and so must we.’

‘If I can just get you out of there,’ Fitz almost pleaded, ‘we could go and get the Doctor, ask him what to do!’

‘We can never be free of these ties,’ Erasmus insisted, and strained uselessly against the mesh as if to prove it. ‘There is no time remaining to us, human.

I. . . I must do this.’

Fitz got the full sense of the man’s emotion, even if he could only catch the gist of the actual meaning. A brick-sized lump in his throat, he crawled over and retrieved the dart gun.

‘No!’ bawled Chloe, kicking her feet against Erasmus, laying herself over Jamais as if trying to protect his sleeping bulk.

Erasmus reached his fingers through the pulsating blue mesh for the weapon.

Fitz closed his eyes and passed it over. He turned away as Chloe screamed still louder.

He would never come down hard on the Doctor again.

‘Forgive me,’ he heard Erasmus mutter.

Then there was a click and the dull thunk of metal on bone. The low, eerie whine of the little girl as she built up to tears.

‘No,’ she was muttering over and over. ‘No, no, no, no.’

202

Fitz turned and saw Erasmus had his eyes closed. The gun had fallen from his limp hand.

The short shaft of the dart was embedded deep in his temple.

‘The strength to act,’ muttered Fitz, ‘and the weakness to wimp out when you can’t make the choice.’

That was the last dart.

Now they were all defenceless.

Anji gaped as Kalicum jammed the stubby gun up against Sabbath’s neck.

The Doctor looked between Sabbath and Kalicum in turn as if following the progress of an invisible ball that battled between them.

‘You presume to turn on me?’ scoffed Sabbath, but nevertheless holding himself dead still. ‘There’s not fullness enough in the sleeve-top.’

‘Your diction’s as outmoded as your ideals,’ sneered Kalicum. ‘It’s been so pathetically simple to dupe you.’

One of the gorillas lunged forwards, reaching out for Kalicum, but as it crossed over the barrier into the sectioned area it staggered to a stop, clutching its head and barking in alarm. Kalicum put the gun to the beast’s chest and fired. The bolt of energy seared straight through it, the animal slumped down in a gory puddle, and Kalicum’s skinny arm was straight back up jabbing the gun under Sabbath’s jaw.

Sabbath’s face reddened, he held up his palm to the other ape, presumably ordering no similar heroics. ‘Kalicum,’ he said in a voice that made Anji shiver,

‘your explanation for this behaviour had better be good.’

‘My people no longer need you,’ said Kalicum simply. ‘You have played your part just as all the others have.’

‘I have willingly given myself to the service of your people.’

‘That service is no longer required.’

Anji looked on bewildered as Kalicum tightened his finger on the trigger.

‘No,’ rapped the Doctor. ‘Kill him and the TARDIS stays here indefinitely.’

‘That seems to be the only card you can play,’ Kalicum observed.

‘A trump card. I might just stay here till kingdom come.’

‘If you will not leave of your own volition I’ll kill you and transmat your craft out of the *Jonah*,’ said Kalicum simply.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘That won’t be so easy as shifting a great pile of diamonds from one room to another. The TARDIS defences can be unbelievably stubborn.’

‘So leave with your lives,’ said Kalicum. ‘Now.’

‘Very well.’ He nodded decisively. ‘We’ll leave at once.’

‘Doctor!’ Anji protested. ‘We can’t leave Guy and –’

‘There’s no other way,’ the Doctor snapped.

203

‘Indeed there is not,’ said Kalicum. ‘You have all served your purpose and are of no further value. Depart with gratitude for your lives.’

And they filed from the shielded room, Anji’s head buzzing and spinning as she crossed back over the threshold into the real world, Sabbath and his surviving ape leading the way back to the hold.

Sabbath stopped when he came across the fallen bulk of another ape, a less bulky red-haired model. He crouched down beside it, feeling for a pulse. The Doctor dropped beside him.

‘Fitz,’ he explained. ‘Sorry.’

‘Move into the time machine,’ grated Kalicum. ‘And go.’

Sabbath rose stiffly. The Doctor shoved his hands deep in his coat pockets and bowed in apology. Then he opened the TARDIS door and waved Sabbath inside. The big man passed through in silence, his ape shambling along at his heels. Anji gingerly followed but paused in the doorway.

‘Goodbye, Kalicum,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’ll meet again.’

Kalicum shook his big head. ‘It is not written.’

‘Oh, of course, that sizeable book your people threw together. . . Do watch out for doodles in the margin, won’t you?’ the Doctor warned him, and pushed Anji inside the TARDIS.

Fitz decided he wasn’t too proud to ask an eight-year-old for advice. ‘Now what do we do?’ he said awkwardly. ‘I mean. I appreciate you’re pretty traumatised, stuck in there with, uh. . . Well, anyway. I’ve got to go and help the Doctor. How can I get outside? There are weapons there, maybe I can use them to stop Sabbath from. . .’

‘Walk to the exit,’ said Chloe dully, pointing to an ordinary-looking green wooden door. The trails of her tears glittered on her red cheeks. ‘It will open as you approach.’

‘I’ll be back. Don’t leave without me.’

‘Before you go,’ said Chloe, who seemed worryingly calm, ‘will you fetch my doll? I dropped her down by the overturned chairs.’

Fitz soon found it, a plastic-faced thing about the size of a real baby, its head dented by the iron leg of the chair that stood on it, one leg looking a little chewed. It would never fit through the mesh, of course. But he showed it to her and she reached through the net to hold its arm.

Fitz felt dreadful. He was leaving a little girl in a cage with the corpse of her guardian and a dying dog. This girl would wind up needing some serious therapy in the future. Assuming any of them actually *had* a future.

He rushed to the door, which opened on to the wild freedom of the overgrown field, and pelted as fast as he could for Anji’s car.

* * *

204

‘Doctor,’ Anji started, ‘you can’t just –’

‘Quiet,’ he said, pacing around the console. ‘I must think.’

‘Where’s Fitz? He must still be outside somewhere. Or are you planning on running out on him too?’

‘I said quiet, Anji.’ He ran over to the doors where Sabbath stood disconsolate beside his tame ape. The gorilla growled half-heartedly, but the Doctor shushed him as well. ‘It’s Sabbath we have to listen to.’

‘Haven’t you reasoned it out by now, Doctor?’ said Sabbath.

‘Oh, most of it. The diamonds will be implanted in Guy’s body. Guy will be placed in the casket. The casket will be placed at the null point, before the universe began.’

Sabbath said nothing but the Doctor continued, his voice rising in passion and pitch.

‘While Guy is suspended in the casket, the alterations to his genetic structure will activate, inflame whatever is in those diamonds, creating a syner-gism, each feeding off the other. And when the universe ignites, the casket will go with it.’

‘And Guy will be killed,’ said Anji.

‘Guy will have ceased to exist by then in any case,’ said the Doctor. ‘But the force he’ll have become a part of won’t be destroyed, will it, Sabbath? It will expand as the universe expands. It will become a part of its fabric, insinuating itself with the dark matter that permeates the universe.’

‘What the wraiths were warning you about,’ Anji chipped in when it became apparent Sabbath still wasn’t speaking.

The Doctor waved a hand in front of Sabbath’s eyes as if to break a trance.

‘But it’s more than that. With this alien essence permeating everything, it will be there when the first supermassive stars fashion themselves from helium and hydrogen. It will be there when those same stars go nova and produce the universe’s first metals – from which, billions of years later, the first plan-etary matter will form. From which, ultimately, all sentient life will develop.’

The Doctor was working himself up into a frenzy, and finally grabbed hold of Sabbath by the lapels of his military overcoat. ‘The alien essence will be in everything, everyone – but what is it? What have you been trying to bring about, who is it all for?’

Sabbath angrily knocked the Doctor’s arms away. ‘I have seen both past and future,’ he said, ‘I have seen the base instability of time, and the horrors that lie waiting to threaten the Earth.’

‘A world you are pledged to protect.’

‘I will bring it stability!’ he roared in the Doctor’s face. ‘A delegation of future humans came to me when I was first initiated into the Service. They showed me the horrors of raw time, the dangers that lurk beneath reality’s 205

tender surface. And they showed me how the Earth might flourish. How the human race might truly prosper.’

‘It’s not an alien essence, is it?’ breathed the Doctor. ‘It’s human. That’s why you need a human key.’

Anji struggled to keep up. ‘He wants to seed humanity throughout the universe? Make people a part of everything?’

‘It is a genetic directive,’ said Sabbath. ‘One that will recognise any evolu-tion deemed unacceptable and modify it along human lines.’

The Doctor looked at Sabbath with something approaching wonder. ‘So all those pacts you made with alien devils to extend your power and knowledge were meaningless – because you knew that in the resurrection of the universe they would no longer exist. This was always your end goal. No aggressive, inquisitive extraterrestrial lifeform will be allowed to rise, your new sentience will see to that.’

‘The Earth will develop and expand into space in total security. Humanity shall rise all across the cosmos,’ said Sabbath. ‘We shall succeed in ruling time absolutely where your own people failed. It is the only way we can be certain to succeed.’ He sneered at the Doctor. ‘Anachronisms like you and the child-sensitive shall wither and die at last – your own time at last superseded by mine.’

‘And Kalicum was a child of this future, was he?’ The Doctor was half smiling. ‘Sent back to assist you that you might have the honour of securing a magnificent destiny for all humanity, is that it?’

Sabbath didn’t need to answer. They both knew the Doctor was right.

‘But now you’re wondering. . . Since he’s turned on you, but only now at this last crucial stage, perhaps your agendas are different after all. Perhaps it’s some quite different distillation he plans to place in those diamonds. Have you thought of that, hmm?’

Sabbath was silent and still as a statue.

‘Yes,’ breathed the Doctor. ‘I’ll bet you have.’

‘Well, how are we going to stop him?’ asked Anji. ‘You’re not really going to leave the *Jonah* and let Kalicum do all this, are you?’

‘We have to depart from here. It’s important Kalicum believes we’re cutting our losses and getting out.’

‘Believes?’ she said tentatively.

Then the Doctor smiled sneakily and nodded, and Anji found that she believed too.

Chloe is waggling Dolly at Jamais. ‘Look,’ she says. ‘My lovely dolly. Since you’re so boring and dull and only want to sleep all day I’m going to play with her instead.’

Jamais doesn't stir.

She kisses her doll, kissy-kissy-kissy, as noisy as can be.

Finally, one dark eye winks open. His look tells her, *Why have you woken me? It hurts when I'm awake.*

But Chloe only knows it hurts when he's asleep. And Erasmus is getting cold. She'll have no one to look after if Jamais goes too, except herself. No one to love and nothing left but her hard plastic doll, coldest of all.

The air shimmers and Kalicum appears beside the portable console.

'The time-ship has gone. The recursive anomalies are receding.' He barely looks at her, flutters his long, stiff fingers like fans. 'Take us back to the null point. The mesh won't let you go anywhere else.'

Chloe knows that Mummy's friend Fitz is coming with guns. 'Bad Jamais,'

she hisses, and thrusts the doll in his furry face.

He yowls, and spits the past out of his open jaws. Satisfied, Kalicum glows and flickers away in a flash. And Chloe's home starts slowly to shift, to slip its moorings.

A sudden coruscation from the crystal walls dazzled Guy, made him cover his eyes. When he'd blinked away the blindness he found Kalicum standing beside him. He flinched from the skinny man's presence, held up his fists.

Kalicum seemed amused. 'The time has come for you to realise your destiny, Mr Adams,' he whispered. 'The most precious man in the entire universe.'

He extended a hand to Guy, who didn't take it.

Then one of Kalicum's fingers extended upwards and outwards at lightning speed. Guy recoiled but his face burned with a livid scratch. He fell backwards. Saw Kalicum standing there holding out a long stick of crystal over him.

No. The crystal stick was his finger. It was pointed at the end like broken glass and it was dark with blood. In his other hand he held a small diamond between finger and thumb.

‘I’ve irradiated the diamonds,’ he said, whatever that meant. ‘This is the first. The lodestone, you might say.’ He smiled. ‘Call me old fashioned. I wanted to place it myself.’

Guy stared at the gemstone which seemed to pulse with a weird energy. He wanted to get up, get away, but he felt pinioned to the floor by invisible arms.

The cut on his face. Was he drugged now? He felt tired and sluggish and supposed he was.

Kalicum pressed the diamond into the cut in his face. He felt it squirm down beneath the skin like it had a will of its own.

Before he could scream out the drug took full hold. Guy slipped away into darkness.

207

Thirty-one

The operation

Fitz had grabbed the rifle from the totalled car. Close by, he found the broken, abandoned body of one of the chimps. It looked so peaceful, so sad in death that Fitz felt a bad stab of guilt until he recalled the look in the ape’s eyes as it prepared to blow his head off.

He swiftly prised its rifle away from its dead fingers. Two guns were better than one. The extra firepower might come in useful.

He set off again for the doorway, rounded the side of the warehouse.

And found the building that had swallowed the *Jonah* had gone.

There was nothing there. Just a view of the dark, slow-flowing river, as when the TARDIS had first arrived. But where had that bloody great tree sprung up from? He didn’t remember seeing it. . .

He grinned. Of course. The place was like a TARDIS that actually worked.

It blended in with its surroundings. Fitz ran for the tree, the rifles slung over one shoulder. Soon his breath was coming in jagged gasps.

Then he heard a familiar wailing, grating, grinding sound.

The tree began to flicker and fade, taking off without him.

‘No!’ he yelled at the tree, quickened his pace. He was nearly there, if he could only find the way inside before –

With a painful thump he ran into the blue police box that had appeared out of nowhere.

‘Fitz!’ cried the Doctor in surprise, peering round the back of his TARDIS.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m about to rescue you,’ Fitz explained, rubbing his bruised shoulder.

‘Consider me grateful. Now come on, quickly!’ The Doctor turned away and Anji pushed past him to help up Fitz.

‘How are we doing?’ asked Fitz.

‘Badly,’ said Anji, and by way of hurried demonstration she gestured to Sabbath and his uniformed gorilla following the Doctor inside the giant oak.

‘You’re his prisoners?’

‘Nope.’ Anji shook her head and he could see how worried she was. ‘We’re all in this together now.’

* * *

209

Trix couldn’t see Guy any more. He had vanished, his image shut off like a light.

Then suddenly Kalicum stood beside her. He stroked her face and scratched it. She felt the latex tug at her cheek as it tore, but had he drawn blood?

‘Gently, old one,’ he said soothingly. ‘A mild sedative only for one as fragile as you. Still, you shall suffice for my purpose.’

Trix saw his finger was a stump of crystal jutting out from the knuckle. She tried to back off in horror but he grabbed her arm. She didn’t resist – if he felt the well-toned muscles there he might realise the truth about her age.

‘I have need of you, you see,’ he went on. And suddenly she was free of her blank prison and moving through some weird, angular space like a set from *Barbarella* had the director been a German expressionist. She found herself grateful for Kalicum’s guiding hand – she couldn’t perceive distance here, could barely keep her balance as she tried to take in the extruded corners, the strange slant of the floor, this disorientating lighting.

‘Don’t be alarmed,’ Kalicum told her, easing her on to the shadow of a couch she couldn’t see. ‘I designed this place. To perceive it properly requires greater senses than you possess.’

Trix stared round in a daze. You didn’t need superhuman senses to know that the place stank of sterility, like an operating theatre.

Guy was beside her, his shirtsleeves rolled up to above his elbow. She felt a snip in her bare wrist and suddenly the two of them were connected by something she couldn’t see. She couldn’t drag her arm away. Panic threatened to cloud the little judgement she had left. And then she took in the pile of diamonds between them.

‘What are you doing to us?’ she murmured in a fragile voice.

‘To you, nothing. You are merely keeping the human’s physiognomy stable while his body adjusts to the trauma of carrying its new payload.’

The pile of diamonds glowed more brightly. The stones seemed to scatter, to float lazily into the air about her like glittering little bees leaving their hive.

Then Trix felt a tug on her arm and she was drawn into Guy’s darkness, some private place he’d retreated to. All she could hear were his screams.

Anji had guessed she’d find the boardroom of Timeless inside the tree but it didn’t make it seem any less bizarre. And whereas before the room had been a cool, safe haven from the attack of the wraith creatures, now it shook like it wanted to break apart. She found actually forcing herself inside the room hurt more than entering Kalicum’s capsule chamber.

‘The dimensions are shifting,’ the Doctor shouted back at her. ‘Come on, you two, get through or you’ll be repelled into the vortex!’

‘Doctor, it’s no good!’ yelled Fitz, crowding behind Anji. She saw Sabbath safely inside, looking at her struggles emotionlessly. His ape stared round the rumbling room, growing more and more agitated.

‘Chloe!’ cried the Doctor. ‘Wait!’

‘Jamais is taking us away,’ she shouted back.

‘I’ve extended the forcefield of my TARDIS to surround yours,’ he called.

‘But it can’t travel to where you’re going unless you let it! Unless you work with me, Chloe!’

‘Please!’ Anji screamed.

Chloe squealed at the sound of her voice. ‘Mum!’

And instantly, the juddering of the room lessened. Anji was able to force her way inside, and Fitz tumbled out of a split in the wall behind her, pale and sweaty. The ape narrowed its eyes at him and his pallor whitened still further.

But with a click of his fingers, Sabbath brought the beast back under control.

The big man’s eyes were on the Doctor, who was racing over to where Chloe lay imprisoned in a metal net. The links glowed a spooky shade of blue.

Anji went after him. She held out her hand to Chloe, who grasped her fingers through the mesh like a lifeline. Jamais nibbled her knuckle and gave her a slobbery lick, then sat back weakly, watching her, his dark eyes unfathomable. The air was buzzing and rippling with repressed energy. Jamais was still poised to do his thing whatever the consequences.

‘What’s happened here?’ the Doctor asked, prodding the prone body of Erasmus as he studied the blue-glowing links in the net.

‘He didn’t want to be with us any more,’ said Chloe sadly. ‘He ended his life.’

Sabbath strolled over, his ape at his heels. ‘The net functions as an energy dampener. It suppresses the temporal powers of your people.’

‘A prison and torture chamber in one, hmm?’ The Doctor looked up at

him.

‘And designed specifically to keep Jamais on a tight leash, I’d imagine.’

‘To limit and direct its energies,’ Sabbath agreed grudgingly. ‘The beast has no choice other than to go back to the Null Point.’

‘Then perhaps it’s a good thing Erasmus took his own life,’ said the Doctor brusquely. ‘His sacrifice wasn’t in vain after all. His own life force has been removed from the mesh’s power equations. So while we can’t change Jamais’s course, he can at least take up the energy shortfall and extend the range of his time field.’ He looked at Chloe. ‘Help him. He must take my TARDIS back to the start alongside your own.’

‘We understand,’ Chloe said softly.

‘And go back as far as you can, Jamais,’ the Doctor urged the shivering black bundle. ‘Give me as much time as you can manage.’

Jamais looked into the Doctor’s eyes as if hypnotised.

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‘Thank you,’ whispered Anji, and the beast broke off to look at her fondly.

She grinned at him and squeezed Chloe’s hand back tightly.

‘Doctor!’ shouted Fitz from across the room.

He was pointing to Sabbath, swiftly scaling the rungs that striped the steel circumference of the *Jonah*. The gorilla had bounded across the room ahead of him, and screeched in triumph as it opened the hatch on the stubby conning tower. In its free hand it carried a rifle, clearly swiped from Fitz.

‘Sabbath, wait,’ cried the Doctor.

‘This is my ship,’ he called back down, the long tails of his greatcoat flapping in the breeze that seemed to be building in the room. ‘I intend to reclaim it.’

‘I’m coming too.’

‘I think not.’ As Sabbath reached the deck of the *Jonah* he whirled

round to show he held a rifle too, pointed at the Doctor's chest.

Anji felt for her own rifle slung over her shoulder – then realised she was looking at it. She swore at her own stupidity in leaving her back turned to Sabbath for a moment.

The Doctor made for the side of the *Jonah* and Sabbath fired a warning shot over his head. The Doctor's curls danced in the slipstream and he froze.

Sabbath nodded with satisfaction, then followed his ape down through the hatch.

Fitz had staggered over to join them. 'What do you call a gorilla with a rifle?' he said miserably. 'Apart from, "Sir"?'

'Bloody terrifying,' she said quietly, and he nodded.

The weird breeze grew stronger, swiping through the room. A pressure was building in Anji's ears.

'What's happening?' she shouted.

'Jamais is making the jump back,' the Doctor shouted over the sound of the gathering storm. 'Could be a rough trip. I doubt he's used to taking so much extra baggage along for the ride.'

Suddenly Jamais saw Chloe's doll and snapped at her, almost biting off her dumpy plastic leg. The Doctor snatched the doll away, right out of Chloe's hands. He looked deeply into the animal's eyes, as if cautioning it.

'No distractions,' he said, waving the doll. 'Now. I'm going to try to reach Trix and Guy.'

Fitz stared. 'You're going in there after him?'

The Doctor had crossed to the portable control panel parked in the *Jonah's* shadow. 'This is another matter transporter.'

'Like the one in the capsule chamber,' Anji realised.

'Exactly. I hope it will take me there just as it did Kalicum.'

'What about us?' asked Fitz plaintively. 'What can we do?'

‘Watch through the windows,’ he said, waving at the three round portholes in the wall. They were flickering with bright energies. ‘Give us something practical to do!’ moaned Anji.

‘Would you settle for practically impossible?’ He tapped out a brief one-handed tattoo on the controls. ‘Anji, that casket will be expelled from the *Jonah* the moment Kalicum is ready. You must get it open and get Guy out of there if you can. Understand?’

She and Fitz nodded.

‘Of course, you don’t understand the dangers,’ he added brightly, ‘but it’s probably best that you don’t.’ With that, he faded from sight. Chloe’s doll still clutched tightly in one hand as if for comfort.

Anji looked at Fitz. The energies built up more and more fiercely in the large room, like flames rising ever higher.

After what seemed like an age hemmed in by thick darkness, Trix was dragged back to the light by the sensation of Kalicum’s long cold fingers worrying away at her wrist.

‘The procedure is ended,’ he hissed in her ear. ‘Your work is over.’

‘What did you do to me?’ she murmured indistinctly, her tongue too thick and dry to get round the words.

‘Your human essence has kept him stable, his new nature in balance. Now he must be placed in the casket.’ He stroked her cheek and whispered, ‘Be patient only a little while longer, feeble one. Then you shall sleep and know peace.’

With a roar Trix brought her fist up against Kalicum’s pointed chin with all her strength. His big head rocked back on his neck and locked at right angles to his spine. Then he tottered and collapsed on the tiles.

‘Feeble, my arse,’ muttered Trix. ‘There’s peace for you.’

She got up from the air-chair and stumbled over to where Guy lay suspended in space. Aside from an angry-looking cut on his face there was no obvious sign that Kalicum’s procedure had damaged him; he was still fully clothed for God’s sake. She frowned to see a lump in his trouser pocket. She prodded it with a fingernail – it was hard as glass.

‘Pardon my curiosity,’ she told him, and reached into his pocket.

He'd been carrying round a half-empty bottle of what looked like moisturiser.

Just then there was a glow of light in the darkness beyond the distorted dimensions of the theatre. A dark shape shifted through the shadows towards her. Trix looked around in panic for somewhere to hide.

Then she found the Doctor standing beside her, looking at her wide-eyed with concern. 'I could've died from old age waiting for you to show up,' she 213

grumbled.

'The make-up fooled him, I see,' he said, gesturing to Kalicum. 'Well, we haven't got long.' The Doctor moved over to inspect Guy's prone body, dropping a child's doll on to the floor as he did so. 'Sabbath will be here at any moment with his apes. They're out for blood and probably not that fussy whose.'

'What's happened to Guy? All these diamonds seemed to just float inside him and –'

'Oh no.' He peered at a display which was all Greek to Trix. 'I'm too late.

The diamonds have been transferred inside. . . I'd hoped I could transfer them back out but they're already hooked into his augmented genetic structure.

'They can't survive outside of him.' He looked up at her in dismay. 'They're changing him even as we speak.'

'Then there's nothing we can do for him,' said Trix firmly. 'We'll just have to save ourselves.'

'No. Well just have to carry him out of here. You take his feet.'

Trix stared at him. 'Doctor, that's ridiculous –'

'We can't just leave him!' the Doctor implored her. She did as he asked, and helped the Doctor carry Guy off the couch. Together they squeezed round the side of the simple grey sarcophagus, but as they reached the doorway, she felt suddenly nauseous. Her vision started to blur.

And she felt the diamonds rippling and burning under the surface of Guy's skin, stinging her hands. She let go with a shout of pain.

The Doctor gasped with pain. 'The diamonds must be programmed not to leave the chamber,' he said through clenched teeth. 'Clever. Guy's not leaving here except in that capsule. Help me get him back.'

'Make up your mind, will you?' Cursing all the way, Trix helped him manoeuvre Guy over again to the couch. 'Now don't you think this dead horse is flogged enough? I'm sorry for Guy, of course I am, but I'm not going to die for him!'

The Doctor seemed not to hear her, staring at Guy as if mesmerised.

She grabbed him by the arm. 'We have got to get out of here!'

He shook off her hand. 'You go. Get out of here. But take this.' He pressed a small metal dart into her hand. Frayed yellow fabric stuck out from the stock.

'What am I meant to do with this?' she enquired.

'Use your imagination. I found it in the hold, it's tipped with tranquilliser, legacy of one of Fitz's near misses. But be quick. Like I say, Sabbath is on his way here. Delay him for as long as you can. If you can lead him away from here altogether, still better.'

She folded her arms. 'Doctor, I'm not one of your tame stooges like –'

'Do it, Trix,' he thundered.

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Something in his eyes – that on-the-edge look – pushed an icy shiver through her bones, but she was damned if she'd let him know that. She pressed the bottle of moisturiser into his hand. 'It just so happens I needed the exercise in any case.'

It was a relief to trade the weird wrongness of Kalicum's operating theatre for one with the more usual four walls, floor and ceiling. But something about the fat grey capsule that filled the room unsettled her as she squeezed past.

There was something expectant about the way it sat gloatingly in the small space. Waiting.

'What can I do?' she heard the Doctor mutter miserably as she left.

‘What can I salvage from this?’

And this time she couldn’t stop the shivers when they came.

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Thirty-two

The last, despairing try

Trix moved as quietly as she could along the gloomy corridors of the *Jonah*, biting her lip. This was crazy. This wasn’t what she was about. She should never have let herself get in a situation like this.

Because now she had to find a way out of it. If she didn’t get the Doctor the time he needed, he’d probably die.

And then what would happen to her?

She should’ve just skipped town when Ralf and Susan Canonshire had finished their little charade. After all, she was a multi-millionaire now. It was easy to win the Lottery when you had the next week’s numbers written on the back of your hand.

Trix swore. She was going to bloody well live long enough to enjoy it. And that meant until her skin was as wrinkled and saggy as this stupid disguise.

‘All right, Doctor,’ she muttered fiercely. ‘You’ll have your distraction.’

And as she rounded a curve in the corridor, a light bulb lit up over her head bright enough to warm the way for a moment or two. ‘I’ll probably put my back out,’ she muttered, ‘but, a plan’s a plan!’

She set to work.

The Doctor stared anxiously at Guy. The couch he lay on was connected to the portable console. Clearly Guy was unable to walk to the capsule; he would be automatically transported there when whatever was inside him was good to go. And then, the capsule would transfer out into the void, ready to become as one with the fledgling universe.

For the first time in an age, the Doctor had truly no idea what he might do next. He felt crushed, defeated. Angrily, he threw Chloe’s doll and the bottle of lotion to the floor.

And then, as if suddenly electrified, he scooped them up and clutched them to his chest like the baby was real, and the bottle the most precious in all creation.

Because, very possibly, it was.

Sabbath moved purposefully through the vibrating corridors of his craft, the gun gripped in both hands. Now he had three apes at his heels. He had col-217

lected two from the control deck, the brightest and cleverest who were trained never to leave the heart of the *Jonah*. They had remained to guard against any possible attack while the others of his crew had investigated the Doctor's intrusion: now he had given them direct orders to enter combat mode.

Their teeth were bared, their animal excitement roused. They would show no mercy.

He paused by the darkened hold. The fallen orang-utan had vanished.

A low groan came from the shadows, the sound of someone dragging themselves back to consciousness. Sabbath peered into the gloom, tried the switch but the lights were malfunctioning.

He detected movement. Caught sight of a figure shifting weakly in the shadows, of pale skin on a big, bulbous head. Clearly his ape had recovered and dealt well with this mutiny.

'Kalicum,' he sneered. 'It seems the future has stored some surprises for us both.' He levelled his gun at the shadows. 'Come out. Now.'

There was no response.

Sabbath stepped aside and clicked his fingers, and his apes rushed in to the room, shrieking and roaring, fangs bared. But though they seized the figure he did not come easily.

'Take him alive,' Sabbath commanded, impatient with the struggle.

But by now his eyes were adjusting. He saw one gorilla grasp that big, oddly wrinkled head.

And peel off the saggy, wrinkled skin of some kind of mask to reveal the enraged and screeching ape beneath.

Sabbath scowled. He, of all people, was allowing his rage to taint his

intelligence. He opened his mouth, about to bellow at his crew to cease this charade. Then he felt a sharp metal point stick deep into the back of his neck.

His voice died in the back of his throat.

‘Sorry, dearie,’ hissed a female voice in his ear. ‘But you really shouldn’t judge by first appearances. Get the point?’

‘Catch this female and kill her,’ Sabbath gasped at his bewildered apes, as he started sinking to the floor. He fumbled for the dart in his neck and yanked it out. His vision began to blur. But he clenched his fists and fought against the drug, focused on his heartbeat, drove it faster and faster, fast enough to drive out the poison, fast enough to beat his other senses back into life. He would not submit.

As his apes bundled *en masse* in pursuit of their human quarry, Sabbath set off dizzily down the passageway. The floor was still trembling beneath his feet as if in fear.

As he neared Kalicum’s lair, a familiar voice called his name. He turned, forced himself to focus.

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Then he half smiled. ‘Doctor.’

‘It’s over, Sabbath,’ said the Doctor softly from the shadows.

Sabbath turned away and staggered on, swung the wheel that opened the door to the capsule chamber. ‘Not yet it isn’t,’ he hissed thickly.

Anji stared out in wonder through the windows in the wall of Chloe’s ship, clutching hold of Fitz’s hand.

They had arrived.

Here they stood, before the beginning of the universe, standing in a few homemade seconds of time.

Outside was the void, the absolute nothingness that held the speck that could ignite at any moment into. . . everything.

Anji had expected to feel awe and majesty and a million different emotions. But with disappointment she found there was nothing stirring inside her. Maybe because that was all there was, anywhere.

Everywhere.

Nothing.

‘It’s actually kind of boring, isn’t it?’ muttered Fitz. ‘It reminds me of the halfway house on Mount Snowdon on a foggy day.’

‘Thanks, Fitz,’ she said. ‘Should anyone ever actually ask me what it was like to be standing on the cusp of all creation, you’ll be pleased to know that brilliant observation of yours will be the only bloody thing I’ll be able to think of.’

He shrugged. ‘Shall we see how our chauffeurs are doing?’

They crossed quickly over to Chloe, who was trying to shake Jamais awake, tears streaming down her face. ‘Help me!’ she shouted. ‘Please! He won’t wake up!’

Anji was on her knees beside the little girl in a moment, feeling for a pulse in Jamais’s cold, sealskin neck.

‘It was too much to bring everything here! Too much!’

Anji pressed her hands against the animal’s chest, but there was nothing there now. Jamais’s eyes were closed, his breathing had ceased.

‘Poor little bugger,’ sighed Fitz softly, as Chloe shrieked in pain.

Anji reached out to the girl through the net, who tried clumsily to hold her back. She felt the cold buzz of the mesh pressing into her skin, but ignored it.

Chloe was sobbing and wailing, trapped in the net with two corpses.

‘We’ve got to get her out of here!’ Anji snapped at Fitz like he was somehow responsible.

‘Wait,’ he said, calmly. ‘When Erasmus died, the net lost power. Now the pet’s popped his little clogs, well. . .’ He raised his eyebrows at her.

She saw the links in the mesh were glowing only feebly now.

‘Try it,’ she said.

As she shushed and made reassuring noises to Chloe, Fitz took the edge of the mesh caught beneath the cold, stiff bulk of Erasmus and pulled. Gently, he eased it over the big man's body – and up over Chloe's skinny legs.

'That's it,' muttered Anji, and helped him manoeuvre the net up over the little girl's shuddering body. 'Hold still, sweetheart. The net can't hold you now.'

With a shout of triumph, Fitz finished lifting the mesh free and threw it with all his strength. It skittered away, like a wounded animal, before stopping lifeless in a tangled heap. Anji lifted Chloe away from the cold bodies of those the little girl had loved, and held her as close as she could.

A clanging sound from the *Jonah* made Anji jump and Fitz swear. Even Chloe looked up from Anji's shoulder.

It was the hatch cover on top of the *Jonah*. First it shook, then it swung open.

'Help me!' yelled Trix, her head sticking up from the conning tower. 'There's a bloody great ape with a gun right behind me!'

'Get out of there, then!' Fitz shouted.

'Nice one, Einstein,' muttered Anji, plonking Chloe into his arms. She ran to the side of the *Jonah* and swung herself up the slippery rungs.

'What are you going to do,' called Fitz crossly, 'throw it a banana?'

That would at least be a stab at a plan, thought Anji ruefully as she reached the deck.

Trix had almost made it out of the hatch. Then she shrieked and fell forwards.

'It's got my foot!' she gasped, her fingers scraping against bare metal as she tried frantically to find something to grab hold of, anything that could stop her being pulled back down inside the ship.

Anji threw herself on her front and reached down into the dark hatchway.

She felt thick, rubbery fingers clamped round Trix's ankle – presumably the beast's other hand held the gun, but there was no

room to wield it in the cramped space. So she dug in with her nails as hard as she could, gritting her teeth, working the sharp points as deep and far into the animal's flesh as she

—

A guttural grunt echoed up at her and the fingers pulled away. With a yell of triumph Trix shot forwards, slithering out over the metal and losing her balance. As Trix fell to the floor far below with a thump, Anji closed the lid of the hatch. Then she looked over the side of the ship.

Trix was lying winded on the wooden floor, panting for breath. But she gave Anji a weak thumbs up, which Anji returned.

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'That's not going to hold them!' yelled Fitz. 'They'll just work the mechanism from the inside! Trix, where's the Doctor?'

Anji jumped for the rungs without even turning back round. She could hear the hiss and buzz of the hatch mechanism opening even now.

'He stayed to try and help Guy,' Trix gasped, still fighting for breath. 'No chance, I reckon.'

'We're all dead anyway!' shouted Chloe, her wonky eyes all red and puffy.

'We can only exist here because of Jamais providing the time. Now he's gone, his protection's fading too!'

Fitz helped Trix back up, and Chloe ran and threw herself back into Anji's arms. The hungry howl of one of the apes roared up out of the hatchway.

Anji felt like joining in with its screams.

Sabbath staggered inside the capsule room. Beyond the grey matt bulk of the capsule, he saw Kalicum was stirring on the spotless tiles of his surgical theatre, his large head bobbing from side to side on his scrawny neck.

Kalicum saw him and smiled. 'Greetings, foolish one.' He eased himself up into a sitting position.

'You've been attacked,' Sabbath observed.

‘This form I wear is weak.’ He turned his back to Sabbath to inspect his controls.

‘It is your spirit that is weak, Kalicum. You are corruptible, beneath contempt.’ He advanced. ‘And I will prove a shrewd Caesar to you.’

Kalicum seemed not to hear, engrossed in the console’s displays. ‘Good. . .

The diamonds are breeding. The body is in the capsule. All is prepared.’

‘What is in those diamonds?’ Sabbath demanded, dragging his coat sleeve over his sweating brow. ‘To what have you bent my purpose? You will tell me.’

But even as he spoke, the capsule glowed with an unearthly light and faded from view.

‘It is done,’ said Kalicum simply. ‘And alas, my poor, simple dreamer, I shall tell you nothing.’

Sabbath could feel the drug filing down his senses, gaining hold.

He

clutched his head in his two huge hands, forced himself to focus on Kalicum.

But where once there was a man, now there was only a column of crystal, ice-bright and stretching from floor to ceiling.

Then it cracked, with a noise like bones breaking.

Sabbath collected his wits and dived for the door. His senses jolted and jarred as he tumbled out into the corridor, heaved shut the door and spun the locking wheel – just as the crystal column shattered and a million lethal shards shattered through the room, destroying everything.

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He staggered back up. Headed for the bridge of the *Jonah*. He must summon his ape crew, find a way out.

He would live to know the answers to his questions. And he would act accordingly.

Anji backed away alongside the others as the gorilla leaped out from the hatch like a jack-in-the-box and ranged over the prow of the *Jonah*. It swung round the rifle to cover them, mouth wide open, a defiant roar building in the back of its throat.

Then it cocked its head, as if listening to something Anji couldn't hear. She glanced at Fitz anxiously, but his eyes were glued to the massive ape, as were Trix's.

'His master is calling,' said Chloe quietly. 'He has to obey.'

And sure enough, the ape turned and lurched back over to the hatch. The gun fell from its fingers, a toy suddenly forgotten along with its targets.

'Maybe they're getting ready to leave,' said Trix.

'But they can't!' Anji cried helplessly. 'The Doctor's still on board!'

'Look!' shouted Fitz. He was pointing through the window.

The capsule had appeared, a huge silver bullet hovering in the void.

'Guy must be in there,' Trix realised.

Anji made for the door. 'Come on!' she told the others. 'We've got to get that thing open and get Guy out!'

'Terrific,' said Fitz nervously.

'Why does everyone have to be a hero?' said Trix sourly.

Fitz poked her in the ribs. 'I didn't hear you complain when –'

'Can we just go if we're going?' hissed Anji. 'Before my nerve's gone all together.'

'I'll help you,' said Chloe shyly.

Anji opened the doors and took a deep breath.

'So this is nothing,' she said.

The void was absolute and seemed – well, it would, Anji supposed – to stretch out forever. If you looked at any one patch for too long your head throbbed and you started to feel sick, so Anji decided to just focus on the distant capsule outside.

‘There’s no ground, no surface,’ said Fitz anxiously. ‘Well be like in the cartoons, we’ll start running and we’ll fall!’

‘No,’ said Chloe. ‘This is space Jamais has given us. It should still be stable.’

‘But look how far away that capsule is!’ moaned Trix.

‘There’s no time, no space, not really,’ Chloe told them. ‘They’re distorted.

Can’t you see?’

222

She stepped outside, and so Anji, Fitz and a reluctant Trix allowed the little girl to lead them across the wastes to where the capsule lay. For a time it seemed that it was getting no closer. Then suddenly they were on top of it. It seemed anchored in the nothingness – yet they could move all round it and even feel underneath.

Fitz was straight at the capsule and trying to heft it open. ‘It’s jammed, it won’t shift.’

‘The Doctor said it was unbelievably heavy,’ said Anji, adding her weight to the struggle to lift the coffin-like lid.

The speck of the atom still hovered unnervingly near. Sometimes Anji caught it out of the corner of her eye as a dark pinhead, other times, it was so vast she could only feel it, like a shadow pressing down on her senses.

‘Surely there’s some mechanism that opens this thing,’ argued Trix.

‘Here!’ cried Chloe. She was small enough to be able to look up and see controls hidden in the base.

She pressed something, and with an electronic growl the lid began to open.

Anji took a step back, scared of what she might find inside. She didn’t protest when Fitz slipped an arm round her waist to steady her.

The lid swept slowly open. And Anji gaped as she stared inside.

‘Dolly!’ whispered Chloe in amazement.

That was all there was – the doll, all goopy with some slathered-on lotion.

Anji could see the bumps and points raised out against the plastic skin.

‘It’s covered in that moisturiser gunk Guy was carrying in his pocket,’ realised Trix, now swapping a blank look with Fitz.

‘His miracle burn cream,’ nodded Anji.

Fitz picked up the doll cautiously and passed it to Chloe.

‘She’s ruined,’ the little girl sighed.

‘But if the diamonds are inside the doll. . . ‘Anji set off at a run back to Chloe’s ship, which still held the shape of a tree beside the bold blue rectangle of the TARDIS. Her stomach twisted and bunched, fear and anticipation all mixed up together.

She pushed her way into Chloe’s ship.

And saw Guy, dazed in his shirt-sleeves, standing by the *Jonah* and swaying like a sapling in the breeze while the Doctor clanged down the last few rungs.

‘You did it!’ she yelled, and uncertain who to hug first, tried clumsily to get them both. Guy clung on to her for support, and the Doctor slapped her heartily on the back. Behind her she heard shouts of surprise and confused cheers from Fitz and Trix and Chloe.

‘We should stand away from the *Jonah*,’ the Doctor said, pulling out a handkerchief. ‘I think Sabbath’s going to try to leave. He summoned his apes to the command deck, so they were somewhat distracted while Guy and me slipped 223

away.’ He carefully took the doll from Chloe’s sticky fingers. ‘Wipe your hands.

Don’t let your skin absorb the cream.’

‘You all right, mate?’ Fitz asked Guy.

‘I don’t have a clue,’ Guy admitted feebly.

‘He’ll be all right,’ said Anji, looking to the Doctor to back her up in this.

He gave her a small smile and nodded. ‘The Timeless philosophy,’ he said, looking at Chloe.

‘Save who you can,’ the little girl agreed.

The Doctor turned to face Anji. ‘And a promise is a promise,’ he added.

‘Never mind wallowing in the syrupy stuff, what did you actually do?’ Trix demanded. ‘Are the diamonds really in the doll? How did you. . .’

But the Doctor was already on the move again, crossing to where Jamais lay still and silent.

Anji followed him. ‘Come on, Doctor. Answers. Why did you cover a plastic doll in the miracle burns remover?’

‘Because there’s no such thing as a miracle burns remover.’ he answered simply. ‘It’s just genetics. Upon contact with the skin, the lotion works with the DNA structure of the owner to remove damaged cells and restore the original code.’

‘So?’ Fitz was struggling. ‘A doll has no DNA.’

‘That’s why I had to give it some! Guy’s!’ He turned round and beamed at his little audience. ‘The lotion is self-programming, you see. It absorbs information from the user’s genome upon first contact so it might go to work more rapidly in future applications.’

‘So only I could use that stuff?’ Guy asked him, wide-eyed.

The Doctor nodded happily. ‘Yes! That lotion was useless to anyone but you once you’d primed it with your DNA print! But I’m so glad you didn’t just throw it away like I suggested.’

Trix was nodding now. ‘So you made a little genetic shell for the dolly here out of Guy-shaped DNA, and the diamonds went for it?’

‘It seemed to fool their sentience sufficiently.’ the Doctor agreed excitedly.

‘So I transferred the diamonds out of Guy and into the poor doll.’

‘Any harassed genius could’ve done it,’ smiled Fitz.

‘So now we can take this dolly apart,’ said the Doctor, ‘and find out

just what it was that Kalicum was trying to achieve.'

'Another sacrifice,' Chloe murmured miserably. 'Like Jamais.'

She gestured to his prone body.

'Oh, dear me, this won't do,' said the Doctor, pressing his hands against the animal's flank. 'He must wake up, we need him to get us away from here!'

'It's no use,' Chloe said, fresh tears dripping down her red cheeks.

224

The *Jonah* had started rocking and steaming. 'How's Sabbath going to get out of here?' Fitz demanded.

'I'm not sure he will!' called the Doctor over the clanking and grinding and swooshing of the ship's machinery. 'It's a long way home for all of us.'

'Doctor!' shrieked Chloe, so loud it almost burst Anji's eardrums.

Jamais had opened his eyes.

'He was shamming it,' breathed Fitz. 'Faking it, like you can, Doctor.'

'Who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks?' the Doctor grinned, as Chloe shoved him aside to cuddle her pet. 'Respiratory bypass – playing dead removed his energy from the mesh equation. I suggested the idea to him so you'd be able to remove the net without difficulty. Jamais is a very bright creature.'

'So now he's Dr Doolittle too,' said Guy to Anji, his expression suggesting he'd gone beyond bewilderment.

'Sorry, but there was no time to explain,' he said briskly. 'Now, come on.'

He looked up worriedly to where the *Jonah* was still wailing and rocking like a beached steel whale. 'The TARDIS.'

'What about this place?' asked Trix.

'We'll have to take it all with us, of course,' said the Doctor. 'But I think it's safer for us if we steer from the TARDIS – if Jamais is up to it.'

The dark beast had raised himself up on his great shaking paws and was limping along towards the doors beside Chloe. Trix and Fitz supported Guy between them, and the Doctor led the way. Anji followed on behind.

‘You were naughty for scaring me like that, Jamais,’ Chloe scolded him now she’d got over the shock. ‘I never want you doing that again.’ And as they left the ship and stepped out into the blind whiteness of the void, she started to dab at her dolly’s puckered skin with the handkerchief, cooing and muttering soothing words to her make-believe friend.

But Jamais had narrowed his eyes. He wanted attention. He wanted fuss.

And the stupid doll was getting it instead.

Anji saw his neck bob up, his sharp jaws open.

‘No!’ she yelled.

But Jamais had grabbed the doll’s legs in his mouth and yanked her away from Chloe.

‘No, Jamais!’ thundered the Doctor, who’d turned and taken in the scene in one glance.

Too late.

Jamais threw back his head and opened his jaws.

The mutilated doll flew through the air, spiralling through the nothingness.

‘Quick!’ the Doctor screamed. ‘Inside the TARDIS!’

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Everyone broke into a mad scramble as the doll sailed lazily towards the atom.

And with a whimper, the universe was born, and something else along with it.

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Twenty-three

The survivors

It was a select gathering, Anji's 'Starting Over' party. Her, of course, Fitz and the Doctor, Stacy and Guy. And Trix, because it would've been rude not to. Of course, it was also a 'Thank you for clearing your junk out of my flat' party; the thought of having her own place like in the old days and everything just so was almost as intoxicating as the special-recipe rum punch Fitz had provided to 'get the party going'. Almost.

It was a time to celebrate new beginnings. And endings, of course.

The Doctor had known she wouldn't be walking through the doors of his old police box again.

Jamais had done his thing and hiccupped them a few billion years beyond the Big Bang, earning reluctant favour from all aboard after his disastrous green-eyed tantrum. Once the ship was back under control, the Doctor had taken them back to Anji's. The day was wet and cold, vintage English summer.

While everyone else trooped automatically back inside her building (what the neighbours now made of her was anyone's guess) Anji had lingered outside, unable to resist stroking the battered wood of the police box.

The Doctor came back out to see her. 'Soon be goodbye.'

She turned to face him, the long, proud face, the pale appraising eyes. The ghost of a smile on his lips.

'Soon,' she said.

The party was fixed for the next night. No sense drawing things out, the Doctor said, and meanwhile everyone seemed to have things they wanted to do on their last day.

Fitz wanted one last lunch at the Groucho club with the high society he'd fooled so amicably.

Trix had volunteered to go back to the flat in Battersea and tie up loose ends, such as arranging a broker to put it back on the market. She knew someone, she said. And had a numbered bank account into which the profits could be poured, of course. It figured.

Chloe had wanted to go to the park with poor, hobbling Jamais. The

irony of the situation hadn't been lost on the Doctor; having fought countless alien 227

horrors to preserve the safety of the universe, he'd finally lost the battle to a jealous pooch.

The Doctor wanted to spend his day in reflection on the events they'd all witnessed, trying to decide what they could do next.

Guy had the more humble aim of visiting Stacy in hospital. Anji went with him.

They walked together through the pale green corridors of the hospital. Guy bought some tulips, red splashed with white.

'Maybe you should get yourself checked out, while we're here,' Anji suggested.

'Nah.'

'You know, you've been through a lot, and –'

'Quite an adventure, wasn't it?' beamed Guy.

She frowned. 'Er, don't you think you should be just the teeniest bit freaked out after all you've been through?'

'Possibly.' He shrugged. 'Maybe that'll come later. Flashbacks, nightmares, all that stuff. But right now, I want to concentrate on living a bit.' He stopped in the middle of the corridor and held both her hands. 'I want to eat pizzas with every topping on the menu,' he said slowly. 'I want to see every place in every country in the whole, wide world. I want to start listening to music again instead of just hearing it in the background – throw out the compilations, get into some new bands. I want to learn a new sport, visit my gran more, pay back my mum what I owe her, stop just coasting by, put my heart into things. . . ' He paused. 'And get out of bad relationships a lot sooner.'

She half-smiled. 'Oh yeah? And has Julie heard about that yet?'

He pulled a face. 'This morning.'

'And is she pressing charges against the mysterious Phantom Temp for assault?'

'She's convinced herself she fell down the stairs,' grinned Guy. 'And that's another thing I want to start doing. I want to start to stop

kidding myself that stuff is OK when it's really not. Like staying in a job I hate because it might lead to promotion, advancement, another thirty years of being bloody miserable.'

'And does our big, hilarious, crooked boss-man know about this?'

'He's going to,' said Guy, with a slow smile. 'He's going to know about a lot of things, sometime soon.'

'Going to be quite a transformation,' Anji observed. 'But I have faith that you can change.'

He smiled, surprised. 'Yeah?'

'You've stopped clicking your tongue for starters.'

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Guy blinked, quite taken aback, and kept quiet for a few moments as if his treacherous tongue might prove him wrong.

But it didn't, and the two of them walked off again, arm in arm.

Stacy looked a mess, her face bruised, lips cracked and swollen. She seemed quietly pleased to see them, and her ribs were apparently only badly bruised.

She was being let out later that day, and so received an invite to Anji's little soiree.

'I don't know about a "new beginning" party,' said Stacy. 'It seems I had my new beginning some little time ago. And I'm not so sure I'm ready to celebrate it just yet.'

'Everyone would love to see you,' Anji told her. 'And the Doctor could.
..

Well, he could tell you everything. Everything you wanted to know.'

'What happened to Basalt?' asked Guy.

'They took him to a different hospital,' murmured Stacy. 'I whacked him so hard they don't know if he's going to wake up again.'

'Well, then,' said Guy darkly. 'New beginning for him too.'

Stacy sniffed. 'It's like he knows. He knows that if he wakes up he'll go

to jail, he'll be locked up for life. This way. . . he's still in control.'

No one said anything for a while.

'I don't know if I do, now. Want to talk to the Doctor, I mean.' Stacy used her fingers to make quote marks: "The Whole Truth."

'After all you've done, all you've been through to find it,' Anji said softly,

'don't you think maybe you should -'

'Leave it, OK?' Stacy scowled at her. 'I'm not like Guy. Not about to flick on my happy switch and thank God I'm alive. Because I've completely screwed up. From now on, every single day, I'm going to have to drag around the carcass of the old me, the different me, wherever I go.'

Anji looked away, nodded some token understanding. Guy said nothing, apparently absorbed in trying to arrange the tulips in a cracked vase. Their bright heads bobbed about cheerfully on the ends of their long stalks.

Maybe Anji should just butt out of the woman's grief and leave her to it.

But she was tired of just disappearing after the wrongs were righted, leaving others to clear up and cope while she jaunted off to explore somewhere new.

Guy had plans, big plans. And so did she.

'Come tonight,' she said. 'Bring a bottle. Bring your carcass along, too.'

Stacy looked at her sharply, and this time Anji held her gaze. Stacy got bored first, and turned her head to the window. To the serene rain tapping lightly on the glass. To the flowers, ineptly arranged in the grubby vase, but happy-looking nonetheless.

* * *

'One more thing,' Guy said, once they'd said their goodbyes to Stacy. Anji could see a trace of worry clouding his face. 'There's someone else I have to visit.'

Anji realised he was leading her to the paediatrics unit. A bright mural depicting colours of the world united in happiness and health streamed across one wall, right into the ward.

‘The bed’s empty,’ Guy announced. Then he approached the tired-looking ward sister, a big-boned woman in her twenties growing out a shaggy perm.

‘Excuse me, I’m looking for Pete Webber?’

‘They let him go, love,’ the nurse told him. ‘Miracle recovery. Sent everyone round the twist, it did. His mum went through the roof.’

‘Oh?’ asked Anji innocently.

‘She was making a real fuss about it. . . Went crazy. Talking about suing the hospital and all sorts. You’d think she’d be thrilled!’ She looked at Guy and shrugged. ‘Some people are just never happy are they. That why you left her, was it?’

‘Eh?’

The nurse looked knowingly between Anji and Guy like they were a couple.

‘Well, you’re the father, aren’t you. Must be.’

Guy looked anxiously at Anji. ‘Must I?’

‘He’s your little Mini-Me!’ she chuckled. ‘You’re the spitting image of him, aren’t you?’

Guy smiled weakly. ‘I guess I am now.’

He turned on his heel and Anji helped steer him in a straight line back down the corridor.

‘You tried to help, and you did help,’ Anji consoled him. ‘Sort of.’

‘Liz’ll kill me,’ he moaned.

‘How will she ever know it was something you did? And anyway, it’s better than him being scarred for life. Just.’

Guy pulled a face. ‘Thanks.’ He shivered. ‘Can we get out of here, now? I think I’ve had enough of hospitals for the rest of my life.’

They got back to find the flat transformed. It was festooned with balloons and ribbons, and a home-made banner stretched above the curtains that said

‘Saluting Survivors’ in bright childish letters.

‘Oh no,’ said Guy in a stage whisper, pointing to the kitchen with exaggerated worry. ‘The Doctor’s hitting the bottle!’

Anji went through and saw him. He was sat hunched over the kitchen table with what appeared to be a half of lager shandy.

‘Isn’t it a little early?’ Anji enquired, mock stern. ‘Doctor, I don’t want this party getting out of hand.’

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He looked up at her and smiled faintly.

She sat down beside him. ‘Everything didn’t quite go according to plan, did it?’

‘I think perhaps it went according to somebody’s plan,’ he said, sipping his shandy and getting foam on his nose. ‘I must find out whose.’

‘And what was in the crystals,’ she added. ‘No change yet in anything, is there? Maybe they don’t work. Or maybe they were destroyed, outside of their dwarf star carry-case.’

He didn’t look convinced. ‘I think the capsule was designed simply to protect the diamond sentience while gestation was in –’

Guy’s voice floated in from outside, singing ‘La-la-la-la-la. I can’t hear you. . .’

Anji placed her hand on the Doctor’s wrist. ‘Can the wraiths help you?’

The Doctor mused on this, then shook his head. ‘I rather think they’ve ceased to be. They put all their powers into preventing the catastrophe. But with Jamais about. . . It wasn’t enough.’

‘The book, then,’ she suggested brightly. She wished she didn’t feel so guilty at walking out on him before this was truly over.

‘That book would tell us nothing. Even if it could be retrieved from

Erasmus's ship.'

'Well then. . . Do you think Sabbath got away?' she asked desperately.

The Doctor nodded slowly. 'Jamais lifted everyone away from the cataclysm.

Shielded by Erasmus's TARDIS, the *Jonah* would have no trouble escaping.

Once Sabbath's had a good poke round, no doubt.'

Anji nodded, sombrely. Jamais had let go of Erasmus's old time ship in the darkness of the early universe; 'His own Asphodel,' Chloe had whispered.

A tomb that would endure, timeless. One by one, the stars would light up around it like memorial candles.

And with Jamais too old and enfeebled now to go leaping through time and space to new places, Chloe was grounded. For ever.

'Where is Chloe, by the way?' she asked.

'She went out with Jamais after she made that banner. She didn't say where she was going.' He looked at her strangely. 'You shouldn't worry about her.

She'll find her way back.'

Anji shrugged like it was nothing. 'Speaking of coming back. . . Sabbath's bound to turn up again soon, isn't he? He's going to be mightily fed up.' She warmed to a sudden idea. 'And he'll be after Kalicum's lot too. Maybe you should put the boot on the other foot, let him do the chasing round trying to find out the truth about those crystals and how to sort it. Then step in when he's done all the work.'

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He raised his glass. 'Tempting,' he said with a smile. 'But I think I'll take a more pro-active role just the same. Chloe told me she possessed one of Sabbath's diamonds. Kept it in a locket given to her by a Russian princess.'

'She did? Where is it now?'

'Lost, apparently. Somewhere outside that warehouse before they put

her in the net. We'll have to look for that,' said the Doctor thoughtfully, taking another swig. 'Once the party's over.'

Anji nodded.

Abruptly, the Doctor beamed at her fondly. 'What shall I do without you?'

She smiled back, felt tears prick the backs of her eyes. 'Cause the usual chaos, I expect.'

'Come on, you two,' called Guy. 'Liven up. I'll put some music on.'

The moment he pressed play on an old Chemical Brothers CD, there came a knock at the door.

'Oh no! The neighbours are complaining about the noise already!' Anji cried with mock drama.

But her smile slipped when she saw it was Stacy at the door, both hands clutched round a bottle of red.

Stacy shrugged. 'I didn't want to come. But that carcass of mine thought it sounded kinda interesting.'

Anji nodded, and self-consciously welcomed her inside.

It wasn't a bad party, all told, though there were more than a few tears spilled.

Fitz was good value, demonstrating the hilarious dance moves he reckoned had won a hundred hearts in the 1960s. Stacy was studiously sociable, and Guy was still brimming over with his plans for the future.

But Chloe and Jamais didn't come back.

At least that saved some awkward explanations. Yeah, she could just imagine Stacy's face: 'Meet the people who made your nightmare possible!' Anji shuddered, reminded herself this was her New Beginning party. No more dwelling on the old stuff, the dead stuff.

Fine words. But she couldn't help feeling worried for Chloe, responsible even. She drifted off into the kitchen, poured herself another glass of wine.

Was it just because the girl had called her 'Mum'? Had that pressed

some freaky buttons in her she hadn't known existed?

A minute or so later, Guy followed her into the kitchen.

'Hey,' he said. 'What kind of a party is this? No one's snogging in the coat room.'

She made an effort. 'Is that an invitation?'

He grinned. 'I knew you were classy.'

They stood looking at each other for a few moments.

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'I . . .' He cleared his throat nervously. 'I thought maybe you might want to help me eat those pizzas and go travelling and –'

'– and pay back your mother?'

He grinned. 'Of course.'

'Well, maybe we should wait and see.'

'You think?'

She blushed to see the disappointment in his eyes.

'Only. . . Only I don't want to wait. . . '

'I know, Guy. It's just, I've done so *much* travelling. I want to stay home for a while.'

'I get it,' he said, moving closer. 'And you've eaten a lot of pizza too, right?'

'The world will still be around by the time I'm ready to go looking. I know it.' She didn't have to try too hard to force a smile. 'The Doctor's going to win.'

Guy leaned in and impulsively kissed her. It wasn't a great kiss – they bumped noses, and Anji tried to lick her lips first and ended up swiping his chin with her tongue. But it was enough to make her realise there were possibilities ahead of her, and time enough to take them on board.

'We can still be friends, right?' he said quietly.

‘We can still be friends,’ she agreed. ‘Take care of yourself. And look me up if you’re passing through.’

‘Oh, I will.’ He kissed her again, on the cheek this time. ‘Well, I guess be getting off. Say goodbye to everyone.’

The door closed behind him. Anji stood alone in the kitchen for a minute or so, taking deep breaths and looking out over London from her kitchen window. When the door opened again, she half hoped Guy had come back to say one more goodbye. But it was Trix’s reflection in the window pane.

She was done up in her glitzy evening dress and high heels again, effortlessly glam.

Anji turned to face her, arms folded.

‘Here,’ said Trix. She held out a plain white envelope.

‘What’s this?’ Anji looked at the envelope suspiciously. ‘Luncheon vouch-ers?’

‘Look, Anji. . . I’m not good at saying thanks. But, you know. . . ’

Anji accepted it. ‘What is it?’

‘Open it and see,’ said Trix. ‘And. . . Take care of yourself, eh.’

‘Mmm.’ Anji put down the envelope on the table. ‘That’s the dress the Doctor told you to put back before you left the TARDIS, isn’t it?’

‘Yep.’

‘Only you’re not leaving, are you? You’re going with him.’

She nodded. ‘Too good an opportunity to turn down.’

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‘Opportunity for what?’

Trix grinned. ‘Who knows? That’s the fun part.’

For a moment, Anji felt a twinge inside that made her want to run into the TARDIS and slam the door in Trix’s face.

But instead, she simply nodded and held out her hand to shake. Trix

took it without a word, her catlike eyes searching out Anji's. Then she winked and walked away.

Anji eyed the envelope warily, and decided she would open it in the morning, when her head was clearer. She heard Trix outside: 'Oh, Guy, wait. Before you go, there's something I have to give you. . . '

A minute or so later she went back into the lounge, saw people had their coats on, were saying goodbyes. That the party was coming to an end.

Stacy kissed Anji on both cheeks. 'Have a nice life,' she told her firmly.

'You too.'

'You know, I think I will.' She smiled faintly. 'I think I owe it to myself.'

With a brief little wave, Trix saw herself out. Guy had already gone and Trix had apparently followed him.

Anji was alone with the men in her life. And now they were leaving too.

'Visit me, if you're passing,' she told the Doctor and Fitz.

Fitz nodded and gave her a hug. The Doctor joined in and hugged them both.

'We'll miss you,' said Fitz.

'You'll muddle by.'

'And so will you,' the Doctor promised her.

Then they were gone.

Anji crossed to the couch and plonked herself down on it. She looked up at the glittery banner hanging from the curtains until her sight blurred with tears. She felt alone. She'd been the one who chose to stay behind, so why did she feel so abandoned? Where were Chloe and Jamais? They'd not even said goodbye. What if something had happened, or –

There was a knock at the door. Wiping her eyes, Anji padded over to open it.

‘Chloe!’ she said, half delighted, half cross that she should’ve been made to worry. ‘It’s so late, where’ve you. . .’ She trailed off as she realised the little girl was not alone with her pseudo-dog. A tall black guy was crouched a little way behind her, petting Jamais. She stared at him in surprise, and he grinned.

Anji felt suddenly flustered. ‘I. . . Thanks, I mean, I’m sorry –’ She caught herself, took a deep breath. ‘Hi. I’m Anji.’

‘Hi,’ he said back. ‘Greg.’

‘This is my mum,’ Chloe told him.

‘Chloe!’ Anji hissed.

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‘I got lost,’ said Chloe innocently. ‘So Greg brought me home.’

‘Lost? You?’

‘I hope you don’t think I’m interfering,’ said Greg awkwardly. ‘Only I found her wandering about nearby and I thought maybe I should. . .’

‘No, it’s fine, I – I’m grateful. . .’

‘Perhaps you should ask Greg in for a coffee to thank him,’ suggested Chloe. Anji glowered at her. ‘I’m sure Greg doesn’t –’

‘He does,’ Chloe insisted. ‘He works nights at a press cuttings office on Liverpool Street, and has to be off in half an hour. The caffeine will be good for him.’ With that she pushed past Anji and skipped over to the kitchen, Jamais limping along after her.

‘Sorry about all this,’ Anji told Greg. ‘Kids, right?’

‘Well, she’s right about the caffeine. I’d love a cup!’ He was still smiling at her. The lines around his eyes suggested he smiled a lot. ‘If it’s not too late?’

‘It’s not!’ called Chloe.

‘Excuse me a minute, would you?’ said Anji with a tight smile.

‘I’ll wait out here,’ Greg assured her.

She stalked off into the kitchen where Chloe had flicked on the kettle

and was now spooning coffee into a mug.

‘What the hell are you playing at?’ she squeaked. ‘Let’s get one thing very clear –

‘Mum, wait,’ said Chloe, looking up at her. ‘Me and Jamais, we want to stay with you. Here.’

‘Huh?’ Anji sank down weakly into a chair, the wind punched out of her sails. ‘What did you just say?’

‘Please?’ Anji saw the nervousness in the child’s funny eyes. ‘We don’t have anything left or anyone to look after us.’

‘The Doctor,’ said Anji, ‘the Doctor could come and –’

‘We would like a home, please,’ said Chloe softly, and Jamais wagged his imaginary tail.

Anji poured herself another glass of wine. The kettle was starting to hiss noisily as it boiled.

‘You haven’t opened your present from Trix,’ Chloe whispered.

Dazedly, Anji took the envelope and tore it open. There was some paperwork inside, and she sorted through it, incredulous: ‘Birth certificate, adop-tion papers. . . ’ All for Chloe – and all forgeries, of course. There was a note too:

Dear Soft Touch

I arranged these for you. Thought it might make things easier, you know, with the new life thing.

Trix

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‘Most people bring a bottle,’ Anji remarked, her head spinning. She narrowed her eyes at Chloe. ‘You put her up to this?’

Chloe dodged the question by producing a bundle of leaflets and scribbles on paper from her bag. ‘These will help you make childcare arrangements for when you go back to work,’ she announced.

Anji felt her world tilt alarmingly. She looked out of the window at the city, at the indefatigable lights burning in the buildings, so much

brighter than the stars overhead. Life was going on everywhere. 'You shouldn't worry about her,' the Doctor had said. 'She'll find her way back.'

No more walking away.

'OK,' she breathed. 'You can stay for a while.'

'Mum!' Chloe yelled happily, crushing her waist in a huge hug. 'I knew you'd say yes.'

Anji smiled ruefully and sort of hugged her back. 'Don't tell me. It was written in that wretched book of yours.'

'No,' the little girl whispered, eyes closed, content. 'I just knew.'

What are you saying? What are you doing? a terrified voice inside Anji was screaming. But I'll get used to this, she told herself. I'll get used to this.

'Just one thing,' Anji told Chloe, gently pulling herself free. 'No more repeats of the going out and getting lost thing. This is London, it's not safe, you can't just approach people in the street and –'

'But you think Greg's cute!' she protested.

Anji blushed. 'Chloe! He could be a maniac, a –'

'He's not, he's nice!'

'Look, you can't just go out and bring random strangers back to my flat!'

Chloe smiled slyly. 'But, Mum, he isn't going to be a stranger.'

The kettle pinged brightly as it boiled. Jamais gave a quiet woof.

'You realise this building has a no pets policy?' Anji grumbled. But she made the coffee, straightened her top, brushed vaguely at her ruffled hair:

'God, what if he's overheard us? He'll think I'm a total. . . '

She trailed off. What the hell, she thought, and opened the door. The future could take her as it found her. And despite everything she'd been through, and all the uncertainties that still remained, Anji found herself smiling.

Thirty-four

Plenty of pizza

Guy breezed into work the next day. He had to meet with the police at midday, to clear up their puzzled enquiries. No problem.

As of this afternoon, his life was going to change forever, just like that.

‘Hello, Mike,’ he said.

‘Guy!’ Mike looked dreadful. His eyes were red and bloodshot. His beard was getting out of control. ‘Where the bleedin’ hell have you been?’

‘Here and there,’ Guy admitted. ‘Oh, and about my going through your desk. . . I think the coppers are going to want a little rummage themselves.’

Mike’s face blanched.

‘They caught a fella called Daniel Basalt. You ever heard of him?’ Guy’s smile grew craftier. ‘Ever taken any cash off him?’

Mike made a noise like a mouse being stepped on.

‘See, there’s this warehouse outside Denham. Place’ll be swarming with police by now, I tipped them off. Seems someone dumped a white van outside the place. And inside, seems there’s the body of a murdered woman that no one’s got records for, stowed away in a coffin designed for burial at sea.’

Mike clutched his head in both hands.

‘A tagged body,’ Guy went on, ‘that should match up to a licence you prepared and which I’ve given to the police.’

Mike let his head fall forward and crack on the desk.

‘You’, announced Guy, ‘are an ex-boss. With a lot of explaining to do.’ He patted him on the head. ‘Nudge, nudge, wink, wink.’

And with that he walked out.

An absurd spring in his step, he took out his wallet and checked for the millionth time that morning that the piece of paper Trix had given him was still there.

A winning Lottery ticket. All six numbers. Ready to be cashed in.

‘They’re ten a penny in my line of work,’ Trix told him. ‘Take it – you’ll make me feel less bad for being ready to run out on you. I don’t think I’ll have the chance to spend it for a while, anyway.’

Guy cackled with insane glee. ‘Apology accepted.’

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He marched round to Noise Pollution, and straight up to the desk of Annie the admin assistant, the gorgeous, fleeting, drunken snog he’d thought of helplessly so many, many times.

‘All right?’ Guy said.

She stared up at him in surprise.

‘Listen, I was wondering if you might want to come out with me tonight.’

He grinned. ‘And if, by any chance, you hold a current passport. . .’

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About the author

STEPHEN COLE is a freelance writer and editor. He works chiefly in the fields of science fiction and children’s books, though aberrations have been known to occur. His professional association with *Doctor Who* began in late 1996, when he was made Range Editor for the series’ output on books, video and audio; he did two years full time then gradually shucked off his co-ordinating responsibilities throughout 1999 to concentrate on other, marginally less insane areas of work.

The first in his trilogy of original horror thrillers for young adults, *The Werel-ing: Wounded*, is published by Bloomsbury in autumn 2003.

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